THE DIVISION OCULUS RIFT VS VIVE THE CLIMB

# EDGE

THE FUTURE OF ENTERTAINMENT

# DOOM

ID'S BRUTAL RETURN TO THE FPS THAT STARTED IT ALL

## REVIEWED

THE WITNESS
FIREWATCH
XCOM 2
DARKEST DUNGEON
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GEMINI: HEROES REBORN

## BEYOND BURNOUT

THE CREATORS OF THE LEGENDARY RACER TAKE UP... GOLF?

#290
MARCH 2016

# Time and time again, we just don't have the time

First, we had arcade machines. Drop a coin in the slot, press the '1P' button – a few seconds' worth of hassle combined – and go. Then came cartridges. Slide one in and flip the power switch: bingo. Given these foundations, it's hard to imagine how we ever made it through the Dark Age of cassette-based storage, huddled over devices that would take six minutes to wheeze a game's worth data into the 8bit computers of old. Six minutes! That's a good round of *Drop7* right there. Never again, we swore as we moved on to disks, then carts again, then discs, and beyond. Today, we want everything *now*. Shut up with your Kickstarter pitch, take our money, and hurry the hell up with delivering the goods. The game-playing public has never been less tolerant of delays, or loading times, or excuses. All this at a time when we need patience more than ever.

It's taken seven years of development for Jonathan Blow to complete *The Witness*. (It might take some of us the same amount of time to complete it, too.) *Firewatch*, another game reviewed within these pages, may be a more modest proposition, but the production process still took two-and-a-half years. To put it into perspective, consider that artist Olly Moss was a disgustingly young 26 when he started work on the project; as the game launched, the next birthday marked on his calendar was his 30th.

And imagine life as one of VR's true believers in the early '90s. "Mmm. Maybe we need to put this to one side. Let the technology mature a bit. We'll give it a couple of years." Only now, more than two decades later, has the dream of physically immersive virtual environments become realised in a practical sense. In this issue's Knowledge section we look at the respective offerings from Oculus and HTC as VR comes of age at last.

Finally, of course, there is our cover game. A new *Doom* was supposed to emerge from Id some years ago, but the project ran into difficulties. On p64 we visit the studio to find out how it righted its course in order to create an FPS for 2016 that is worthy of the legendary name.

Exclusive subscriber edition

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EDITORIAL
**Tony Mott** editor in chief **Nathan Brown** deputy editor
**Ben Maxwell** writer **Andrew Hind** art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
**Keith Andrew, Joseph Branston, Richard Cobbett, Marsh Davies, Elizabeth Elliott, Wes Fenlon, Will Freeman, Ben Griffin, James Leach, Keza MacDonald, Angus Morrison, Matthew Pellett, Steven Poole, Chris Schilling, Tom Senior, Joby Sessions, Alvin Weetman, Alex Wiltshire**

ADVERTISING
**Steven Pyatt** account manager (+44 (0)1225 687713 steven.pyatt@futurenet.com)
**Michael Pyatt** advertising manager **Andrew Church** advertising director
**Clare Dove** commercial sales director

CONTACT US
+44 (0)1225 442244 edge@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
**UK reader order line and enquiries** 0844 8482852
**Overseas reader order line and enquiries** +44 1604 250145
**Online enquiries** www.myfavouritemagazines.com
**Email** edge@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

MARKETING
**Laura Driffield** group marketing manager **Kristianne Stanton** marketing manager

CIRCULATION
**Juliette Winyard** trade marketing manager (+44 (0)7551 150984)

LICENSING
**Regina Erak** senior licensing and syndication manager (regina.erak@futurenet.com)
Tel: +44 (0)1225 442244 Fax (yes, really, fax): +44 (0)1225 732275

PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION
**Mark Constance** production manager **Nola Cokely** production controller **Jo Gay** ad production controller

MANAGEMENT
**Matthew Pierce** editorial director, games, photography, creative & design **Rodney Dive** group senior art editor
**Joe McEvoy** managing director, magazine division **Nial Ferguson** content and marketing director

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Future, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275

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**Non-executive chairman** Peter Allen
**Chief financial officer** Richard Haley

Tel +44 (0)207 0424000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)

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# Reality checks

With a month to go before consumer VR enters a new era, Oculus and HTC prepare for action

There will be no bigger videogame story in 2016 than virtual reality. Oculus Rift, HTC Vive and PlayStation VR arrive this year with the weight of decades of anticipation on their backs. This time, we're promised, VR will stick, will change how we play games, and – key to both of those – will be affordable.

The latter goal may already be slipping out of grasp, since it turns out that Oculus founder Palmer Luckey's $350 estimate for the price of an Oculus Rift retail unit was over-ambitious. During January's Consumer Electronics Show,

**Daniel O'Brien, vice president of VR at HTC**

the official pricetag was revealed to be an eye-watering $600 (before taxes – and discounting what you may need to add to your PC in order to get the most out of Oculus's technology). With Rift due to start shipping in March, this expensive future is almost upon us.

The time we've spent with both the final Oculus Rift and the second-gen Vive devkit, Pre, reveal that neither is dramatically better than the other, but each has carved out specialities that set it apart from its competitors. The Pre hardware iterates on 2015's devkit with a smaller and slightly lighter headset (although it still feels heavy and ungainly when compared to Rift's sleek design), and the recessed sensors that provide positional data through the setup's laser-based tracking system have been smoothed out, making for a more attractive headset overall. But most notable is Pre's display, which edges ahead of Oculus's solution thanks to a large, rounded field of view and a crisp, bright screen.

"We've redesigned the strap, and we've improved the screen display

HTC's new Vive Pre HMD (note the unit's front-facing camera), alongside Lighthouse base stations and revamped controllers

FAR LEFT **No VR HMD is complete without an undersea experience, and *TheBlu* is Vive's.** CENTRE ***Secret Shop* is set in *Dota 2*'s world.** LEFT **Fireproof's *The Room* demo is just a proof of concept for now, but the game is a great fit for VR**

system. We've implemented mirror correction improvement, and that's kind of like a turning window field," **Daniel O'Brien**, vice president of HTC's virtual reality division, tells us. "If you looked at the [first] devkit and then this Vive, you'll see that there are noticeable differences in the visual experience in the brightness, crispness, and really just feeling like you're there in the space with your content."

**This refinement has** significantly reduced the screen-door effect that blighted early VR headset displays. And, once you've spent a reasonable amount of time fiddling with head position and focus, Pre displays visuals that are encouragingly sharp. While this represents important progress, though, the key innovation comes from a different kind of addition to what the hardware displays.

Valve's Chaperone system uses SteamVR's room-scale tracking to warn you when you're too close to a wall by fading a blue-line grid into your virtual view, and once configured it proves highly accurate. But the Pre headset now also includes a camera mounted on its front that feeds Chaperone data from your immediate surroundings. Tap a button on one of the motion controllers, and you can see objects within the camera's field of view picked out with a shimmering blue outline. HTC demonstrates the feature by asking us to sit on a nearby chair without removing the headset. We locate the ghostly furniture's outline and manage to plant ourselves without any embarrassing toppling at all. ▶

LEFT **Of the various VR controllers to date, Oculus Touch is the most intuitive.** ABOVE **The simple Oculus Remote will come bundled with Rift for media control**

**Valve's Chet Faliszek has emerged as one of the VR industry's most vocal champions**

The camera's data will also be available to developers, who will be able to use it to craft augmented reality games – a feature that smartly positions Vive between the two extremes of Rift and Microsoft's HoloLens, securing HTC's device an additional selling point. That camera isn't just a smart safety feature, then, it's a vital stepping stone in HTC and Valve's plan for room-scale virtual reality to work in environments where chairs and coffee tables may lurk menacingly at shin height.

Unlike the retail-ready Consumer Edition of Rift, Pre doesn't represent final hardware. And while there's apparently little time left to iterate before Vive's planned April release, both Oculus and HTC have form when it comes to holding back the latest version of their hardware in favour of showing older, more stable designs. HTC insists that there's still plenty of scope to use feedback from Pre users to improve its offering further.

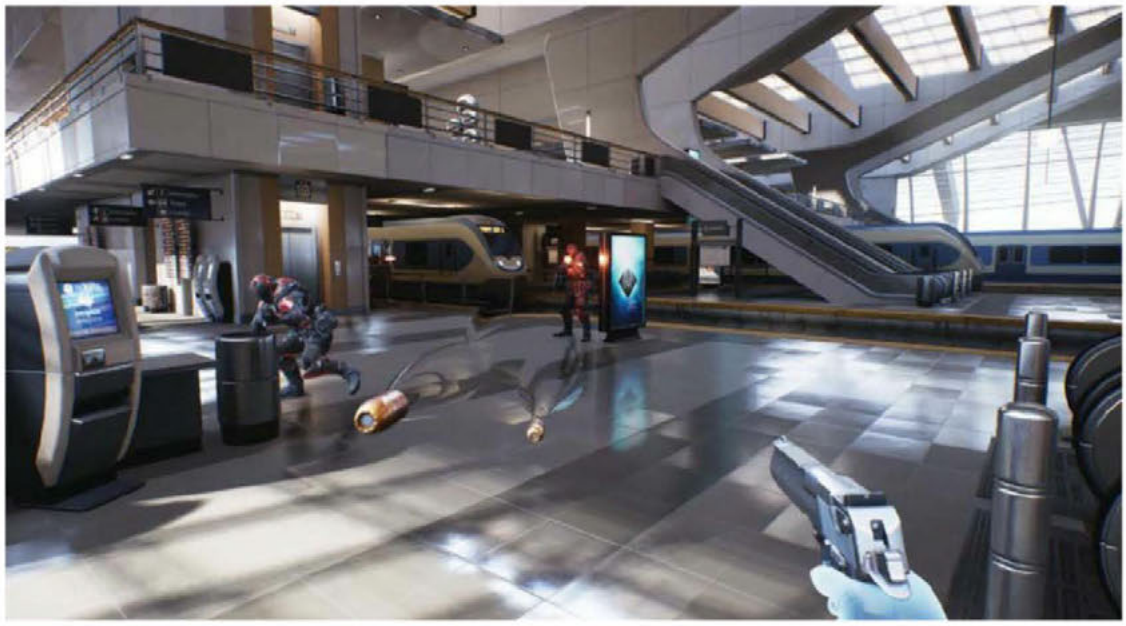
**"We'll definitely take** feedback in, and we've already got this kit out with some developers that have had to update their content that we're showing [at CES], and we will continue to take that feedback," O'Brien explains. "It never stops. You never stop learning, especially with something this new. We've already learned things that we couldn't fix in time for this one, and we'll continue to improve it all the time, as we get to the commercial version."

Vive's big screen is all very well, but switching to the Rift headset immediately after some time spent with Pre underscores HTC's current shortfall when it comes to lightness and comfort. Oculus's design is undeniably more refined, with soft fabric forming a welcome barrier between your skin and the device's hard plastic shell, and a simple strap system that makes even fast movements feel secure. But the Rift display is noticeably narrower than HTC's, which does a better job of enveloping you in its world without immersion-breaking glimpses of black bordering your vision. It may well turn out that Vive's additional bulk is an unavoidable cost of having this greater screen acreage, but whatever weight HTC manages to shed between now and release will be offset by the addition of as-yet-undemonstrated integrated audio – a feature that Rift already offers, along with that weight advantage.

> "We will continue to take feedback. You never stop learning, especially with something this new"

But despite its obvious selling points, Rift's $600 price tag becomes less palatable when you consider that its excellent prototype Touch controllers will remain out of reach until later in the year, designers and players instead getting Xbox One controllers. Vive, meanwhile, will include its room-scale tracking base stations and two wand-like controllers. These have undergone a dramatic improvement since the rather industrial-looking prototypes were revealed at GDC last year. Each controller retains the early design's circular touchpad and a pair of buttons for simple actions, but those angular corners have been smoothed off into something that looks like a piece of Sony product design. Even with refinements, though, HTC's controllers still trail Oculus's Touch prototypes, which convey a more connected, immediate sense of interacting with virtual worlds.

The two designs are guided by the same principles when it comes to their sparse selection of buttons, but if they seem simplistic when compared to traditional controllers, it's entirely intentional. "All of a sudden, all of these things that you've always done



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP **The concept for Epic's Bullet Train Rift showcase may lack flair, but it feels good in the hands; Oculus's Toybox demo lets two people experiment in VR; *Lucky's Tale* is one of two games free with every Oculus Rift**

in games and had to remember – hold down this button while you click the left stick – it goes away and it just works," Valve's **Chet Faliszek** tells us. "So having that kind of simplicity allows you to just hand it to somebody else and say, 'Oh, my god – try this'."

Getting this progressive technology into the hands of actual players will be the greatest challenge, of course. High prices are likely to limit even early adoption – a clear opportunity for Sony to flourish if it can keep the cost of PlayStation VR down – but with initiatives such as Starbreeze's newly announced VR arcade and Alton Towers' world-first VR-based rollercoaster already set in motion, it's obvious that opportunities to present high-end VR tech to consumers outside of their homes are set to increase. Oculus's decision to furnish everyone who bought a DK1 headset with a retail headset when it's released is a shrewd move, then, despite the considerable cost involved.

And it's worth noting the remarkable speed of iteration that Oculus and HTC have demonstrated. Consider that Oculus Rift has gone from a migraine-inducing proof of concept to a gaming revolution in waiting within four short years. It will be difficult to maintain this rate of progress, but it shouldn't take long for prices to begin falling. There are other hurdles that will need to be addressed, not least the relative hassle of adjusting your HMD's setup each time you want to play, and the thorny issue of cables to trip over, but the carefully balanced combination of competition and united front that developers are maintaining, not to mention the enormity of Facebook's backing of one major player, should ease stumbles along the way. But more than technical innovation, marketing and price point, the factor most likely to drive the VR revolution is the unwavering belief of the people pushing for it.

"The competition is virtual reality [itself] and the vision everyone has of virtual reality," Faliszek suggests. "That's what we're trying to deliver. I don't care if there are 30 companies making something else, or no one. We have a goal that we're trying to do, and this is a dream we've had of what virtual reality is, right? Walking around, standing in the middle of content, engrossed, having it all around you. That's what we want to deliver, so that's what we're going for." ■

**VERSUS MODE**
**Raw specs won't shed light on which headsets will succeed, but they do provide an insight into what to expect once you're strapped in.**

**OCULUS RIFT**
**Display** 2160x1200 OLED
**Refresh rate** 90Hz
**Tracking area** TBD (increases with additional camera units)
**Audio built in** Yes
**IPD adjustment** Yes
**Controller in box** Xbox One (Oculus Touch releasing later)
**Other** N/A

**HTC VIVE PRE**
**Display** 2160x1200 OLED
**Refresh rate** 90Hz
**Tracking area** 15ft x 15ft with two Lighthouse base stations (possibility of increasing with presence of additional sensors)
**Audio built in** Not yet, but planned
**IPD adjustment** Yes
**Controller in box** SteamVR controller

**PLAYSTATION VR**
**Display** 1920x1080 OLED
**Refresh rate** 120Hz
**Tracking area** TBD
**Audio built in** No
**IPD adjustment** Yes
**Controller in box** TBC
**Other** Breakout box for AV processing and TV output

# Staying mobile

London Mobile Games Week identifies the problems facing indie developers – and how they can fight back

Discoverability continues to be a serious, often debilitating, issue for mobile game developers – a problem we find Channel 4 addressing directly on p16 – so it's no surprise to see the topic front and centre during this year's London Mobile Games Week. While the five-day conference, which is built around Mobile Games Forum 2016 and also takes in Pocket Gamer Connects, is ostensibly a celebration of the industry, many developers warn of a dire situation for small-screen developers.

"Things should have got better by now," Team Lumo game designer **Jonathan Evans** says during a Pocket Gamer Connects talk. "The tools got better, the hardware got better, and we've got so many more players… but we seem to have invented the 'zombie developer'. The zombie developer makes games, but he has no players."

> "We seem to have invented the 'zombie developer'. He makes games, but he has no players"

Poor App Store sales are hardly unprecedented, but figures put forward regularly during the week make for sobering reading all the same. Of the 150,000 games that launched on iOS in 2014, only a reported five per cent broke even. Likewise, the median lifetime revenue for an average App Store developer now sits at just $400 (£280). To put that into even starker context, Rovio estimates the average development cost of a mobile game to be around $25,000 (£17,500).

"What comes with a gold rush is also some clouds," Rovio executive vice president of games **Wilhelm Taht** says during his MGF 2016 keynote. "It's just not that easy [on mobile]. That's one of the commercial aspects of our industry. Unfortunately, there are signs of growth slowing down, at least in the western world, and player engagement is also dropping within games. Per player, it's dropped to just 20 minutes a day."

Taht cites the increasing efficacy of established studios when it comes to retaining players. While the number of smartphone and tablet owners continues to rise, the discovery of *Candy Crush Saga* or *Clash Of Clans* neuters their desire to try anything new. "Every Thursday comes a truckload of new games on the App Store, and consumers are aware of that," Taht adds. "It puts pressure on us to stand out." It's a sentiment echoed by Chillingo managing director Ed Rumley. "Unless you invest in a new genre, people are embedded in these games," he says. "And on top of that, the super-publishers – the Kings, the Supercells, the Zyngas – they know their gamers, and they're getting consumers in and keeping them."

But standing out needn't mean going toe-to-toe with the likes of Supercell. Slitherine marketing director **Marco Minoli** stresses how important it is to think carefully about your audience, even if the audience you're targeting might not be particularly sizeable. "To succeed, you need to try and find the right angle," he says at MGF 2016. "Instead of simply doing the game you'd like to, or waking up in the middle of the night with the idea that a game will work, focus on doing something the market will appreciate, and consumers will buy."

FROM TOP **Chillingo MD Ed Rumley; gamification expert Gabe Zichermann**

**Slitherine employed this** thinking when it launched World War II strategy title *Battle Of The Bulge* in 2013. On release, the game cost £7.99, ten times the App Store's current lowest threshold of 79p. But Minoli explains that, after researching, the studio chose not to target the mass market and instead calculated that there were enough strategy fans on mobile who were willing to pay a higher-than-average price for a genuinely high-quality tank battler.

"It's all down to finding your own niche," Minoli continues. "Niche needn't be seen as a bad word, either – it means finding the things that are unique to your own business. Profile the people you want to play your game; search for them on Facebook and narrow them down. If you fancy making a game about the Napoleonic Wars, for instance, and there are 700,000 people listed as being interested in Napoleon on Facebook, then you'll hit them all with a Facebook ad campaign easily, and you'll also know how much of the market you capture when you release your game."

Indeed, MGF 2016 in particular is coloured by the notion that it's time for indie developers to pay more attention to the business side of game development. And among developers chatting in the halls at both events, there's a sense that too many indies are eager to blame market forces and larger publishers ▶

**The garish *Lumo's Cat* blends tower defence and realtime strategy elements as you go about ensuring that the titular feline enjoys an unbroken nap**

ABOVE **Wilhelm Taht, Rovio's executive vice president of games.** ABOVE RIGHT **Rovio has distanced itself from the label of game studio, branching out into merchandise and even kids' movies**

LEFT **Slitherine's *Battle Of The Bulge* has succeeded in part by identifying a niche and catering to its needs with careful attention to detail.** ABOVE **The London Mobile Games Week crowd gets to grips with some of the issues affecting portable gaming**

## SOFTLY DOES IT

Where should indies be focusing more of their efforts?

According to Chillingo MD Ed Rumley, "Soft launching for six to seven months is not unusual any more. The big publishers are squeezing the key performance indicators because they've got the muscle." Too few devs realise that soft launching in Canada, Australia or Ireland is where the likes of Supercell hone their games and secure their success. "Many indies do analytics by going down the pub and asking their friends what they think," says MGF 2016 host **George Osborn** (above). "They've got it on a conceptual level – they know they need outside opinions – but they don't have it on an analytical level at all."

LEFT ***Tiki Taka Soccer*** **is PanicBarn's attempt to mix the accessibility of a mobile game with the depth of console mainstays such as *FIFA* and *Pro Evo*.**
ABOVE **One of Chillingo's early successes, *Cut The Rope* was a pioneering App Store release**

– a problem encapsulated by the term "indiepocalypse" – rather than doing the legwork required to help a good game to sell. Soft launches, analytics, PR and marketing must all be considered, and the bald reality is that simply launching a great game in a market where hundreds launch each week is no longer enough. Nor, some argue, should it be.

"If you create a new game, how do you get it into a chart? It's a big problem," Rumley admits. Chillingo is responsible for some of mobile gaming's most recognisable and celebrated releases, including *Cut The Rope* and the original *Angry Birds*, and Rumley believes that the strengthening foothold mobile publishers have in the market today is a direct result of independent developers finding it hard to break into a space in which the charts often represent the stagnation that comes about when a handful of huge hits corral the playerbase.

"Is there any other entertainment industry in the world where you could look at the top-ten content from one year to the next and see hardly any change?" asks gamification expert **Gabe Zichermann**. "The only other industry is television – a very popular industry, but one that's structurally complicated and has been completely blindsided by new platforms in recent years. The danger is that this will happen to mobile."

Is it a question of shifting perspective? While independent developers undoubtedly face a raft of challenges, the major takeaway from London Mobile Games Week is that we may be thinking about what qualifies as a 'success' in entirely the wrong way. Sure, companies such as King and Supercell have secured the bulk of mobile game revenues for themselves, but when the pie is so big there's still room for others to earn some kind of crust from what's left. If you can afford to make your game from the revenues of its predecessor, many summarise, then that itself can be seen as a legitimate success.

> "TV has been blindsided by new platforms in recent years. The danger is that this will happen to mobile"

"There are just so many opportunities for indies right now," notes Jussi Tahtinen, CEO of Nitro Games, during a PGC panel. "You just need to stay alive. Just get whatever funds you can get to keep the company alive in the short term, and then you can focus on the longterm strategy, which is why you're doing it in the first place."

A similarly optimistic tone pervades through indie developer **Tim Constant**'s presentation at MGF. Constant founded PanicBarn and developed *Tiki Taka Soccer*, which launched on iOS and Android last year. Though the prospect of tackling *FIFA* and other established sports games was daunting, he followed an old mantra and moved on what he saw as a gap in the market.

FROM TOP **Jonathan Evans, Team Lumo designer; Nitro Games CEO Jussi Tahtinen**

"Originally the prototype was built to solve a problem I had with football games on the market," he explains. "All the big boys were trying to replicate a console experience on mobile, which doesn't work well, control-wise. Then you had new games – *New Star Soccer, Score* and others – which all play really well, but dilute the experience down to one or two features. I wanted a full football experience with controls specifically designed for touchscreens… Success for me was paying myself a salary – that's quite important – and being able to create iterations and new versions of the game."

He also found a smart way of practising his boardroom patter. "I actually went on to Kickstarter and set up a campaign that I never intended to use because the game is free to play, but the process of doing so asks you all the questions an investor will ask too, so it was really useful in getting me prepared for seeking early investment."

**Just as important,** Constant notes, is attending as many events as possible. Not only is it an opportunity to get your game in front of potential players, and get feedback on what does and doesn't work, but you'll also be able to chat to other developers in the same position and do some good old-fashioned networking in person, rather than via Twitter.

Constant and Tahtinen's presentations serve as uplifting, and welcome, counterpoints to the malaise highlighted elsewhere. It's not easy, but it remains possible to earn a living from mobile development so long as you're prepared to think about all of the aspects that might help make your game a success – however you want to define that. In short, there's still hope.

"TouchArcade editor Eli Hodapp has been quoted as saying that when people say the App Store is 99 percent shit, they're probably not far off," Constant concludes. "The upside of that is, if you do the maths, there are probably only a handful of decent games amongst the hundreds that launch each week. Apple has 16 feature slots to fill and, believe it or not, Apple notices good games." ■

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# Channel 4 news

With publishing arm All 4 Games, the broadcaster is blurring the line between games and television

Channel 4 has been experimenting with games for some years now, commissioning educational projects and spinoffs from its roster of shows. But newly formed publishing arm All 4 Games, a mobile-focused endeavour based in Glasgow that's just announced its launch titles, is set to deepen the channel's relationship with indie developers. Here we speak to games commissioning editor, and industry veteran, **Colin Macdonald** about his ambitious plans for the project.

**How did All 4 Games come into being?**
I started four years ago and before my time here most of Channel 4's involvement [in videogames] had been from an educational point of view. My job isn't to educate but to produce high-quality games that promote Channel 4's shows to a new audience and engage our existing audience. We got to a point a year ago where we were looking at the success we've had and thinking about how to build on it. At the time we were speaking to lots of indie developers because a bunch of them were making the games we were commissioning. At the same time, we were speaking to them about their own IP and seeing devs starting to have big problems with discoverability. So we thought, 'Well, Channel 4 has this big audience; these indies have these great games but no audience. It feels like there's a fit there.'

**How does All 4 Games fit in with the games you've been commissioning?**
I've commissioned half-a-dozen games a year that have been really quite high quality, and have done well. But the problem is that I launch one of those titles, get it promoted across the channel, drive hundreds of thousands – maybe millions – of people to that game and by the time my next one is out most of those players have dropped off and moved on to something else. As a result, I've never built up a Channel 4 game community where I can push people from one game to the next, the way the bigger publishers do. So part of the thinking was, if I launch a Snowman game or a Made In Chelsea game, rather than those players all just disappearing off to play a Zynga game, could we launch another game two weeks later and push that to an existing audience? I can't afford to launch a [commissioned] game every two weeks, but if I can get games from the indie community and fill the gaps between those, I can help other people's games and in return they can help mine.

> "I've had plenty of experience turning TV into games, and my dream is to do it the other way around"

**Why focus on mobile?**
We've got a disproportionately large amount of people who watch TV catch-up, and increasingly on mobile. So Channel 4 knows it wants to be more active in mobile and that everything's converging.

**What makes All 4 Games different to any other publisher?**
Well, partly doing this is to fulfil Channel 4's remit to explore what the future of technology and entertainment is, but it's also about doing our bit to help the community. As a long-standing game developer, it feels nice to be able to go, 'Right, I spent 25 years making games: here are the frustrations, here are all the ways some of the big, bad publishers treat people – let's not do any of that.' We want to be an indie-friendly game label that can bring the benefits of a big TV channel, but without the downsides of working with a corporate organisation – we don't want ownership of IP, we don't want control of the game, and we've got much more equitable revenue share.

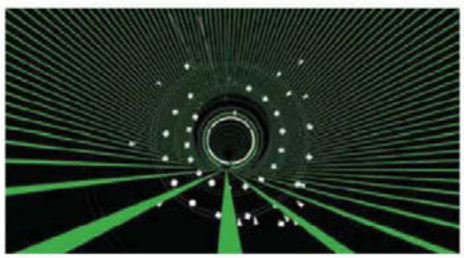
**Prior to becoming Channel 4's games commissioning editor, Colin Macdonald was a producer at DMA Design and co-founded *Crackdown* and *APB* studio Realtime Worlds**

**What revenue split are you offering?**
Channel 4 takes 15 per cent for the first £100,000 – the theory being that if a game 'only' makes that, then the developer needs the money more than us, so we keep our revenue share low. It then ramps up slightly as it hits different revenue targets, but it caps at 25 per cent, so we'll never take more than that. The money just goes back into the pot and helps us to support more games.

**How closely will you be working with the TV commissioning departments?**
We're based up in Glasgow and, while we've got the benefit of tapping into the wider Channel 4 organisation, and I come down once a week, as long as everyone knows what we're doing, we're more or less left to get on with it. I'm conscious that we'll be signing up and working with games that have amazing narratives, worlds to explore and characters to meet and all that stuff. And that can all be extended in a number of ways – especially into TV. I'm sitting down with the TV commissioners every week and can go, 'Right, we're always saying we're short of ideas – here are some great ideas.' I'm not sure what the hit rate would be – it's not going to be every game, probably not even one in 20. But I've had plenty of experience turning TV into games, and my dream is to do it the other way around. ■

**All 4 Games' first wave of titles throws up variety. RetroFist's hand-painted *Fire Fu* was inspired by *Rayman* and asks players to set fire to critters (but not the blameless sheep) by swiping the screen**

***Apestorm: Full Bananas* is a score-attack game in which you commandeer a zeppelin and bomb various man-made structures to free the animals**



ABOVE ***Super Arc Light* is a one-button shooter from former *Alien: Isolation* devs.** RIGHT **Despite little in the way of kids' programming, *The Snowman And The Snowdog* is one of Channel 4's biggest hits**

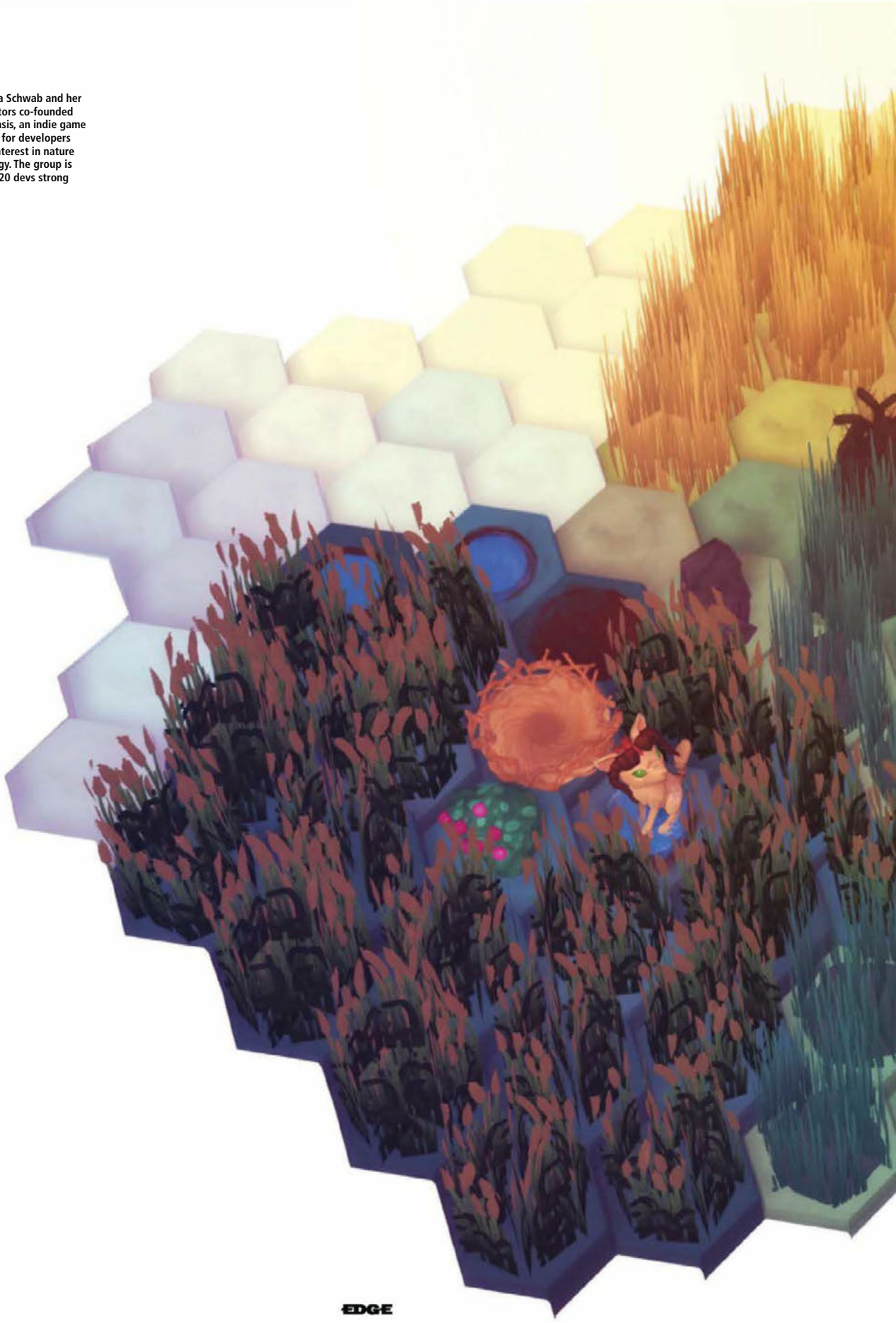
## AGAINST THE GRAIN

Why All 4 Games is expecting to court leftfield developers

All 4 Games

Macdonald has cited Devolver Digital as an inspiration for its commitment to pushing developers to the fore, but, given Channel 4's reputation for disruption, does he also foresee thematic similarities? "We don't want to do *only* edgy games," he tells us. "We just want great games. But my expectation is that they'll probably trend towards being a bit edgier than most publishers would be interested in – partly because of who we are and what we're interested in. So I'm quite happy for that to be the slant we have on things, but by no means is it all we want to look at."

Philomena Schwab and her collaborators co-founded Playful Oasis, an indie game collective for developers with an interest in nature and biology. The group is currently 20 devs strong



# ORIGINAL SPECIES

## A natural-selection game vying for survival on Greenlight

Created by a team of four self-described "biology nerds" from Zurich, Switzerland, *Niche* is a turn-based strategy game about genetic inheritance and survival. Players must try to stave off extinction for their tribe of evolving creatures and ensure the species proves genetically successful.

"*Niche*'s ruleset is built on the five scientific pillars of population genetics: genetic drift, gene flow, natural selection, sexual selection, and mutation," explains **Philomena Schwab**, recent Zurich University Of The Arts graduate and one quarter of the core *Niche* team. "The player commands their animal tribe, manages the resources and chooses which animals should produce offspring together."

The resultant pups will exhibit a mix of their parents' characteristics, which in turn define their ability to interact with what they encounter in the world. Like all of us, these cute critters are lumbered with a limited lifespan, which makes guiding your species' trajectory all the more important as you seek to adapt and find an ecological niche in which to live. It's a teleological slant on natural selection, then, but one that's based on real scientific principles.

The harsh reality of nature is offset by the game's soft pastel palette and charming creature designs. Inspired by boardgames, *Niche*'s inhabitants initially sported a carved-wood look, but the need to imbue offspring with genetic fur colours and patterns meant a switch to what you see here.

The team took to Steam Greenlight in January and plans to move into Early Access later in the year, aiming for a final release in late 2016/early 2017. In the meantime, you can try the PC/Mac demo now: www.bit.ly/niche-demo. ■

# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

AP/Press Association Images

**"We call him R2 Square,** because those are the buttons you press on the PlayStation to get his curling shot. He always scores like that."

**Paul Pogba** pours praise on Juventus teammate Paulo Dybala

AP/Press Association Images

"Y'all fucking server is fucking wack, man. It's that difficult to play somebody online? What the fuck is you doing, Bill Gates? **Fix yo' shit, man!"**

**Snoop Dogg** keeps his cool when a server outage scuppers his *Destiny* plans

"No head tracking, low field of view, essentially a monochrome 3DTV… The association of the Virtual Boy with VR **hurt the industry** in the long run."

Fair enough, Oculus founder **Palmer Luckey**, but where's Rift's *Teleroboxer*, hmm?

"One of the things that concerns me is as we get bigger as a studio, it's not as loud as it used to be. **There's not as much noise."**

You can come and enjoy the honking din of **Edge**'s offices any time, **Atsushi Inaba**

# ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

**Hardware** Polycade
**Manufacturer** In-house

If you haven't yet seen enough arcade machines built for the home, here's another – this time from a team with lineage behind it. Polycade is the creation of Tyler and Dylan Bushnell – sons of Atari co-founder Nolan – and Charles Carden, and represents their solution to the awkward issue of how to fit authentic-feeling arcade play into a limited space. The wall-mounted enclosure is just 17 inches deep at its most prominent point, and 30 inches wide, and comes with 80 vintage games – including Atari's first big success, *Pong*, along with *Pac-Man* and several *Street Fighter II* variants – loaded onto an 8GB SD card. The hardware is built around a Raspberry Pi 2 Model B board, running RetroPie emulation behind a custom UI, the fruits from which are viewed on a 28-inch LED screen. Polycade is available in white, red, black or blue, and in a printed vinyl wrap for a more authentic arcade feel.

It's been built to be highly customisable, too, with a removable control board. You can choose from Classic, with two eight-way Happ joysticks and six buttons per player; a fighting-game-focused Showdown array that uses eight-way Sanwa JLF joysticks; and Tech, which offers eight convex Happ buttons per player and two Ultimarc Mag-Stik Plus joysticks. The first two options sport an additional joystick and two extra buttons between the main control banks, while the Tech model's arrays are separated by a trackball. Starting at $1,750, the first units will begin shipping in March.

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# My Favourite Game
# Dan Schreiber & Andrew Hunter Murray

The QI elves and No Such Thing As A Fish co-hosts on game-related facts, Microsofts Encarta, and NBA Jam

**Dan Schreiber** is a writer, standup comedian, TV presenter and producer, while **Andrew Hunter Murray** is a writer for Private Eye who also performs on stage. They're also both part of the team of researchers behind UK panel show QI, and co-host – along with James Harkin and Anna Ptaszynski – its spinoff podcast, No Such Thing As A Fish. Here the pair discuss arcade humiliation, installation woes, and exploding bananas.

**ALL AT SEA**
**The No Such Thing As A Fish podcast is a weekly, Chortle Comedy Award-winning show in which the team pick their favourite facts from the past week of research and use them as jumping-off points to delve into other curiosities. The team also do live shows, and are currently on tour in the UK, and have released a number of books and a vinyl LP of a never-to-be broadcast episode. See www.bit.ly/QI-tour for tour dates, and www.bit.ly/QI-vinyl for LP details.**

**What's your favourite videogame-related fact?**
**Dan Schreiber** I love that Nintendo used to run love hotels – that's incredible. It's not your usual company trajectory like, I don't know, 'We'll start with model cars and then we'll make real cars.' I also really like that Robert Ballard, a leading oceanographer who discovered the wreck of the Titanic and also hydrothermal vents, only employs gamers to drive his submersibles because they're the ones with the best reactions. Isn't it also true that Aerosmith earned more money from *Guitar Hero* than any of their actual albums?
**Andrew Hunter Murray** Yes! A huge amount more – by an insulting factor.

**What kindled your interest in games?**
**AHM** For me it was the CD-ROM version of Encarta.
**DS** That doesn't count as a game!
**AHM** Wait… They had these little educational games on them. Ultra-simple – you're in a room and you have to answer a question about something in the encyclopedia to move into the next room.

**DS** I still use Encarta for my research – it's my primary source.
**AHM** There was also a game where you play as two monkeys throwing exploding bananas at each other. My father liked me playing it because it teaches you physics, because you have to take into account trajectory and wind speed. All very exciting… and educational.
**DS** I had *Duck Hunt*, but I never got to play it because I could never tune the channel properly. That's my first memory. After that it's just getting my arse kicked in every single game, like *Street Fighter*, because I grew up in Hong Kong where all you did if you were a kid was play games. It was a terrible, terrible introduction to games. I went to high school in Sydney, and as far as I know I'm still the reigning *Ms Pac-Man* champion of the Avalon RSL, which is the Australian equivalent of Royal British Legion Clubs.

> "I love that Nintendo used to run love hotels. It's not your usual company trajectory"

**AHM** I never bought the new expensive games, so when *Deus Ex* came out for the first time I spent a lot of time pretending I'd played it, while my friends talked about the levels they were stuck on. I was still buying all the cheap £5 games in Game in the bargain bin, so I was playing *Might & Magic VII*, which to this day I've not completed because there's a bit where it gets really hard!

**Do you prefer any particular genres?**
**DS** Yeah, I love sports games. I used to love going and standing on a pair of skis in the arcade. I loved any kind of racing games, basketball games, soccer games… Yeah, sport's my thing.
**AHM** I like blowing stuff up. I like shoot 'em ups. I can't get enough of them – they're so simple and satisfying.
**DS** I used to play *Star Wars Episode I: Racer* non-stop. That's an amazing racing game – everyone knocks The Phantom Menace, but some good came out of it.

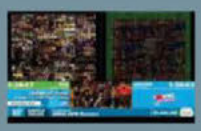
**What are your favourite games?**
**AHM** My favourite game is *Final Doom*, which I never managed to load onto my computer and play. I loved *Doom* and *Doom II* so much, but I could never get the third CD to work. That can't be disappointing.
**DS** How can that be your favourite game?
**AHM** Because it's a potential game. It's a game of anticipation. I've never played it and I probably never will, but it can't be disappointing.
**DS** That's a *terrible* favourite game.
**AHM** OK… *Transport Tycoon* [laughs].
**DS** I struggled to pick just one. It was nearly *Mario Kart* on the Wii U, because I think it's the best game ever made. But the one game I still play competitively is *NBA Jam* on the SNES. Every so often I enter an *NBA Jam* tournament at retro arcade bar Four Quarters in Peckham Rye. You get given a team over Facebook and enough time to buy a retro jersey, so when you play you can be dressed as the players. You go down and there's a whole chalkboard of playoffs and lineups and we made it three rounds in, last time – it was quite tough competition. ■

Hunter Murray (left) and Schreiber often include facts about games in the No Such Thing As A Fish podcast, and are planning to furnish the QI office with a console

## PODCAST

**Bithell Games Podcast**
**www.bit.ly/bithellgamespodcast**

It's been running in tentative form since the beginning of December in the shape of four practice episodes, but the Bithell Games Podcast kicked off 2016 with its first episode proper. Hosted by *Thomas Was Alone* and *Volume* designer Mike Bithell along with Bithell Games COO Alexander Sliwinski, the podcast is an informal chat about games, the team's experience of making them, and "the random stuff" the pair don't find time to talk about during work. It also features regular guests, and in episode one topics of 2015's best games and the daunting task of organising appearances at key game conferences are discussed. Bithell and Sliwinski prove to be charming hosts with a great deal of insight into the machinations and peculiarities of the videogame industry.



## VIDEO

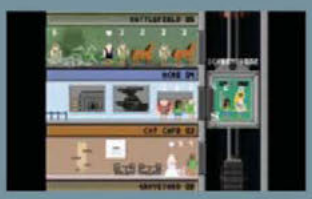
**A Link To The Past Backwards**
**www.bit.ly/zeldabackwards**

Awesome Games Done Quick 2016 featured plenty of showcases of unfathomable skill. Yet equally thrilling are the runs that result from years of work by a passionate community. Here, Andy and Superskulj race through *A Link To The Past* in reverse order, using a series of boundary glitches, level skips and pixel-perfect mirror warps to work backwards from Ganon to the Armos Knights. By the end the game is so visually broken that only a console reset will sort it out – though the winner just plays straight on through. Remarkable.

## WEB GAME

**The Everything Building**
**www.bit.ly/theeverythingbuilding**

A clever puzzle game created by a five-person team for Ludlum Dare 34, *The Everything Building* tasks you with delivering occupants to the floor that matches a number floating over their head. The task is complicated by the fact that you can only have a certain number of passengers (larger people and, uh, horses take up more room) and the ways in which they interact. Lovers and musicians won't reveal their desired floor until you pair them up, for example, while ghosts will scare away potential customers – losing you precious tips. Then there are the magnet-holding scientists who'll reverse your controls, and the bodybuilders who'll make ascending a struggle. *The Everything Building* is everything you could want from a browser game.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

## ATTRACTION

**Galactica**
**www.bit.ly/galactica-ride**

UK theme park Alton Towers has announced that it's developing Galactica, a new ride that mixes a rollercoaster track with virtual-reality visuals. Passengers will lie face-down for the 189-second duration of the ride – in the same manner as existing ride Air, on which Galactica is based – and can choose whether or not to wear a headset. If you do opt in, forces of up to 3.5g (0.5g more than astronauts endure during space launches) will be accompanied by the visual sensation of being shot into the atmosphere aboard a spacecraft. Galactica is due to open in April, before which it might be a good idea to invest in some comfortable queuing shoes.

## continue

**Hand out**
Rift devkit backers will receive a surprise retail headset…

**Sinking ship**
Pirates are steeling themselves for Denuvo Anti-Tamper tech

**Myst opportunity**
Jonathan Blow delivers a smarty like it's 1993

**Leg up**
Kickstarter raised over $46 million for games in 2015

## quit

**Hands off**
… but will have to wait months for a bespoke interface

**Heavy load**
After a flurry of fast-loading games, devs are reverting to type

**Cloud strife**
Shinra joins Aeris in the streaming tech afterlife

**Which craft?**
App Store guardians somehow miss *Minecraft 2*'s suspicious arrival

## TWEETS

Bloody Baron-effect: a sharp pacing drop after dense content with strong potential to disengage players. Now you coin a term.
**Rami Ismail** @tha_rami
Co-founder, Vlambeer

@tha_rami 'Spork in the Road' When a branching story really doesn't change that much with choices.
**Tim** @ineedfocus
Developer

@tha_rami The Point of Press Return: the moment a game pauses itself to warn you that the ending is coming, usually via flow-breaking UI.
**Ryan Jones** @Salty_Ryan
Developer

@tha_rami Abili-tease: when you start a game with all ur skills, then loose them only so you can regain them over the course of the game.
**Nathaniel Morasse** @L33pfr0g
3D artist and former Unity developer

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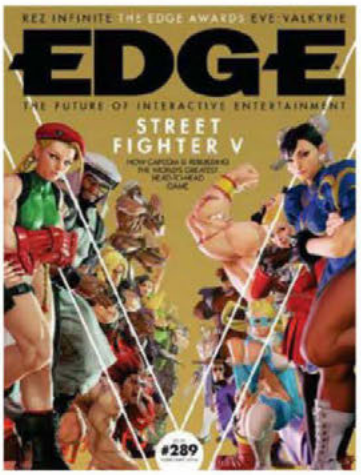
# DISPATCHES
# MARCH




Issue 289

## Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a New Nintendo 3DS XL, supplied by the Nintendo UK store

### Patience and time

I am behind the times. Stuck in the past. I am a lifelong console gamer yet to make the leap to the current gen, and I probably won't for a while yet (mainly because I still can't decide between Xbox One and PS4). I have never been an early adopter and have usually waited at least a year before upgrading. I am clinging to my 360 which, even though it has started making some strange noises, is still going strong. I have a cupboard and a hard drive full of unfinished games that will likely be left untouched and forgotten when I do make the switch.

I try to hold on to the past, though. I still have a PS2 hooked up to the bedroom TV, on which I tell myself I will finally finish *Okami* and *FFXII*. Deep down, I know I never will. Those games will end up being lost to time as their host hardware becomes obsolete.

"I tell myself I will finally finish Okami and FFXIII. Deep down, I know I never will"

Backwards compatibility helped me in the transition from PS1 to PS2, but has become an afterthought these days. Backwards compatibility for Xbox One is a nice idea but is limited. I envy PC owners who can upgrade their rig to experience the new while still accommodating the old.

Going back to games after too many years or hardware generations can damage the nostalgia-tinted memory you have of them when, in the stark light of the present, you compare what they were then to what they are now. This makes it harder to play them again and enjoy them as much as when they were state of the art. I've tried to recapture my youth by downloading the 16bit Sonic games on my 360, and while it was nice to play them again, it's just not the same.

I try to make progress with my older, unfinished 360 games but inevitably end up just playing *Madden* each time I pick up the pad. This really comes down to convenience as I know a match in *Madden* will be over in a set time, say 20 minutes, whereas I would have to commit at least an hour to make any significant progress in other games.

Time is against me. It's too late for a lot of my games. I know that when I do get a new console I will create new memories with shiny new games but some will still slip through unfinished. It's sad to think of all the unexplored worlds and unfinished adventures that sit gathering dust in the limbo of the attic. For now, I'll try to hold onto the past for as long as I can.

**Alex Evans**

PCs aren't quite the solution – games may survive hardware transitions, but they still show their age over time. Anyway, live in the past or leave it all behind – either is entirely acceptable. Although we draw a line at playing online games with a Dreamcast, naturally.

### Vision of confluence

Having just read yet another dressing-down of the current state of mobile gaming by Nathan Brown in **E**289, I thought I'd make a speculative attempt to understand the current mobile gaming market.

Over the festive period I was fortunate enough to be gifted an Android tablet, meaning I could play through some of the quality mobile titles I've missed. However, having quickly burned through the likes of *The Room*, *Monument Valley* and *Hitman Go*, I'm finding it hard to find games that stray far from a few genres: match-three puzzle games, base-builders, and endless runners.

I was born some time after the videogame crash but from what I understand, a lack of quality control saw devs and publishers make and produce games of poor quality in vast quantities, and so audiences became disinterested in gaming as a whole.

Are we currently experiencing a similar situation with mobile games? And just like they did back in the 1980s with the Seal

Of Quality, are we depending on Nintendo striding into the market once again to save the day? With the NX on the horizon, mobile gaming may not be Nintendo's main focus for 2016, but I for one am waiting with keen interest to see what Nintendo intends to do to make its money in the mobile market.
**Ben Monro**

If any company can shake up mobile gaming, surely Nintendo has a good chance, even though *Miitomo* doesn't exactly sound like it's going to change the world. The concern is that cash-hungry Nintendo simply follows existing App Store trends, rather than setting its own. Let's hope not.

## Bad seed down

Nathan Brown's column in **E**288 reminded me: videogames are now made, reviewed and played predominantly by dads. Dads who, just like Nathan, can make knowing jokes about baby faeces to other dads. You know what I'm talking about, right, dads? I certainly do. I know all about baby faeces now. I can joke about it, and come up with funny metaphors to describe it. It's a comedy goldmine, this baby-faeces stuff.

Devs are at it too, forever exploring the poignant bond between father and child. *Fallout 4*. *Heavy Rain*. *The Walking Dead*. *The Last Of Us*. *Shower With Your Dad Simulator 2015: Do You Still Shower With Your Dad?* It's inevitable, as male industry professionals reach breeding age, that they should change their focus.

They have given up rescuing abducted princesses from castles, and are now interested in saving abducted progeny from post-apocalyptic madmen, or serial killers, or zombies, and using their art to express the profound moral uncertainty that comes from being naked in the presence of an infant you are biologically related to. You need to shower. They need to shower. It's really convenient to wash you both at the same time; it's impractical to get a sitter every time you need a rinse, but it still feels a bit off. Only videogames can give cathartic voice to this complex emotion.

Don't start me on *Who's The Daddy*. Do Vietnam veterans watch Full Metal Jacket for relaxation? Indie design will soon be nothing but paternal neuroses. Baby suicide sims will overtake open-world survival games in Steam Early Access and itch.io will be rancid with semi-functional clones with similar sounding names: *Who Is The Daddy*, *Who's Your Dad*, *Who Is Father*, et al.

Anyway, must dash. I've discovered that if I harness the baby to my chest and remain standing upright, jogging slightly from foot to foot, she will sleep for nearly 45 minutes in one go. That's almost half a questline in *The Witcher III*.
**Timothy Franklin**

If you haven't fought a raid boss with a baby asleep on your chest, or arrived at work on deadline day with vomit on your shirt, you haven't lived. Please note: your New 3DS is not recommended for use by under-sevens.

## Fate of all fools

Loft space is often filled with objects that don't need to be immediately to hand: suitcases, spare duvets, tins of paint. It is also a place to store items that encapsulate particular moments in life that have been and gone, be that old school reports, photo albums, or gaming systems from the past.

We have recently moved house, and our new home is literally over the road from the previous one. Before our moving day, I climbed into the loft and surveyed the objects that I would need to take across the road. Did I really still need it all? Of course I did! It's my children's inheritance, whether they like it or not. An extensive Amiga collection, a Nintendo 64 and games, a few different-coloured GameCubes, plenty of vintage '80s toys and there, in the corner, a towering fortress of **Edge** magazines.

I have to say, repeatedly hauling those magazines in stacks of 20 or so, down a ladder, and then the stairs, and across the road was an epic journey. Carrying over 20 years' worth of the future of interactive entertainment from one home to another was back-breaking work. There's your proof that videogames are bad for your health.

Now we are settled in the new house, with the current generation consoles sat beneath the TV, the older consoles wired up to a television in a spare room, and of course the ever-expanding mass of **Edge** sat in a quiet corner, ready for action when required. If you are a longterm videogamer, common sense suggests not to move home too often. I'll be staying put for a while now.
**Ben Bulbeck**

We salute you. Also, we may be moving offices soon – we'll give you a shout, right?

## The last word

I have noticed a pattern emerging with your letters lately, and I wondered if **Edge** has a specific criteria that it looks for.

There always seems to be one about how the author has been playing games since the beginning of time but no longer has the time to do so, often citing family or work commitments as the main culprit.

There is a letter where the author has read last month's column by Steven Poole and feels compelled to make their point using the longest possible words.

There is usually a letter complaining about the costs and efficacy of DLC and/or season passes.

Could **Edge** clear up whether it is complete coincidence regarding this or that we should all be writing these kind of letters to be considered for publication?

I am wondering if I write 'juxtaposition' and 'antidisestablishmentarianism' whether I might win a 3DS XL.
**Rich Lenton**

Ah, so close. As you can see, we can still find room for a bit of nostalgia, but the Dispatches meta has moved on from Poole to Brown. No prize this time! ■

STEVEN POOLE

# Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

It might seem weird to think videogames used to come with manuals – at least to people who have known only hours-long tutorial levels, GameFAQs, instructional videos on YouTube, and whatnot. But they did. The manuals were concertinaed cassette inlays, and later little in-box booklets, describing not only the controls but giving backstory and advising on techniques and tactics. The best game manuals were tiny works of literary art in themselves. I was one of those who religiously sat down and read the entire manual before ever starting to play the game. But the manual is a moribund form now, and hours of FMV exposition and NPC nagging have become the norm.

No doubt it's because I'm someone who likes reading – and who, as a writer, is obviously invested in other people continuing to read – that I'm happy there's at least one modern game that absolutely requires a massive manual. In fact you literally cannot play it without the manual – because it's a twoplayer videogame in which one person is just reading the manual and talking to the other person. This is the brilliant *Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes*, in which one person has to defuse a bomb on screen but has no idea how to manipulate its puzzle-like components, while the other person isn't allowed to look at the screen but is in possession of the Bomb Defusal Manual, and thus is designated the Expert.

This setup ingeniously incorporates amusingly frustrating everyday experiences. It's like an old comedy sketch in which two people are trying to assemble Ikea furniture, one reading the instructions and the other despairingly turning an Allen key. It's also – when you're playing the part of the Expert – very much like being on the phone to your parents and trying to explain how to do something on their computer without being able to see what they're actually doing on screen in response to your advice.

It's a literary triumph too, in the most perverse way, because the manual is deliberately written in an extremely confusing manner, requiring the Expert to navigate thickets of irrationally structured information stuck together with negative syntax, counter-intuitive combinations of conditionals, and bizarre exceptions. If there's more than one yellow wire and the serial number on the bomb contains a vowel but there's no flashing light, then press the big button but keep it held down until you've read the section about holding down buttons... That sort of thing. One big list of rules for various numbers will have the players repeatedly failing unless the Expert notices that a single word in the middle sometimes changes. It's as if Dougal from Father Ted had been tasked with designing an engineering flowchart.

It's a wonderfully silly game, yet maybe it would also be a really good exercise to use in couples' counselling

The dynamic of the high-stakes conversation between the players is thus ripe for misunderstandings and premature explosions. Jeopardy is further heightened by wicked features of the onscreen bomb design, where the Defuser's attention is deliberately misdirected by differences in visual emphasis ("No, I said the WHITE light!" "Oh, I didn't notice the white light!"). Combine all this with a brutal clock timer on every bomb and you have the potential for incomprehension, blame, and counter-blame.

Of course, there's also a deep pleasure in collaboration. Working many rounds with the same partner, occasionally swapping roles, you develop a unique shared vocabulary for the game's systems. My girlfriend and I quickly gave shorthand names to the various possible bomb sub-modules, as well as to each a set of weird pseudo-alphabetical symbols so we could refer to them efficiently. The bomb was our shared enemy. Very little else in the medium can beat the amazing team-fistpump moment when, with half a second to go and no time for her (the Expert) to read about the big button labelled Detonate, I just pressed it anyway, and... the bomb was made safe.

It's a wonderfully silly game, yet maybe *Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes* would also be a really good exercise to use in couples' counselling. After all, it's a machine for generating conflict, and how people deal with conflict determines how successful their relationships will be. The counsellor could record them playing it and discussing it afterwards, and then suggest strategies for better communication and resolution of differences. On second thought, forget I said that. I'm just off to set up a highly lucrative videopsychotherapy practice in Hampstead.

*Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net*

Illustration **marshdavies.com**

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NATHAN BROWN

# Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

This profession is, famously, riddled with perks. Champagne on tap. A lifetime's supply of those tiny little hamburgers. All the free games you could ever play, and all the cocaine you can eat (you eat cocaine, right?). We live lives of such largesse that we're often mistaken for rock stars.

We're not, of course (well, maybe YouTubers are). But there are perks and by far my favourite is the way you get to sit in rooms with people who are much smarter and more important than you'll ever be, and speak to them as equals.

My first overseas gig for **Edge** was a roundtable interview with some of the biggest names in Scandinavian game development. I'd been in the job 18 months and was sat next to the managing director of a studio that had been in business for 15 years. We met shortly after the leaking of Valve's staff handbook; the instantly legendary document that detailed the company's unique approach to working, a flat structure where desks are on wheels and staff can move about between teams and projects as they like. As someone who knew, or thought he knew, a bit about running a business, it seemed to me to be a lovely idea that was probably completely unworkable in practice. The triple-A MD had a slightly different take on it. He loved the idea, but felt it put a ceiling on Valve's growth. That if the company's headcount rose above a couple of hundred people, there would be chaos.

Every time Valve gets something wrong – which is often – I'm reminded of the MD's line. It gets right to the heart of Valve's problem: it's a hugely ambitious company whose ambition is always going to be restrained by the need to keep within a certain size. When you realise that, so much of what Valve does makes sense.

A few months after that roundtable discussion I met Valve's then-business development guy, Jason Holtman. Valve had just announced Steam Greenlight, pitching it as a community-led solution to the company's achingly slow curation process. Holtman said that the entirety of Steam was, at that point, run by a team of a dozen people, and despite the massive surge in the volume of games on the platform, I doubt that number has changed much since. With SteamVR, SteamOS and *Dota 2* – and, Gabe willing, some actual game development – on the go, who's going to wheel their desk over to the Steam team, with their spreadsheets, their support tickets, their asset-flipping hentai dating games? I wouldn't, especially without fear of a boss over my shoulder telling me what I *should* be doing.

There may be a ceiling on Valve's ambition, but it makes sure it reaches for the skies anyway

Steam's latest problem – a caching error over Christmas that randomly showed other users' account details when you logged in – wasn't Valve's fault but that of an external firm. All 200 staff could've been working on Steam and it still might've happened. But Valve's lack of response was further proof that it's suffering, rather than benefitting, from its philosophy. It's a highly secretive company; it doesn't announce projects, it shows them, keeping its cards close to its chest until it deems its work ready for the public eye. That's fair enough when you're making games, or hardware. But when you're running a shop? It's terrible practice. The 21st-century customer expects round-the-clock support. Here they got nothing until a hand-wavey statement was issued days after the fact that contained no apology and took a few liberties with the truth.

But a few days later it was all forgotten, when a suspiciously well-timed ARG linked to the (terrible) Steam winter sale got half the Internet in a froth about how this time it was maybe, definitely, probably not a sign that *Half-Life 3* was about to come out. Whether pre-planned or not, it was a masterstroke from Valve, using its reputation for surprise and innovation to wipe out all that negative sentiment by putting a couple of lambdas in a webpage and watching as Reddit went bananas.

Few other companies could do that. But equally, few other companies would look at a headcount of 200 people and think that between them they could support a new operating system, PC gaming's principal marketplace and platform, and one of the biggest F2P games on the planet while devising best-in-class VR tech and maybe developing the most eagerly awaited game on the planet on the side. There may be a ceiling on Valve's ambition, but it makes sure it reaches for the skies anyway. Frustrating as that can be, I wouldn't want it any other way.

*Nathan Brown is* **Edge***'s deputy editor, and his name just happens to have three Ns in it.* Half-Life 3 *confirmed*

Illustration **marshdavies.com**

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# THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH


**36** **Tom Clancy's The Division**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

**42** **Overwatch**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

**46** **The Climb**
PC

**50** **Homefront: The Revolution**
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**54** **Bravely Second: End Layer**
3DS

**56** **A Hat In Time**
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**58** **Finding Paradise**
PC

**58** **The Final Station**
PC

**58** **Noozh**
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**58** **Pokkén Tournament**
Wii U

**58** **Monster Hunter Stories**
3DS

# Moving on up

On February 17, 2014, Cliff Bleszinski laid out the immediate future of the online shooter with a single tweet: "Wall running is the new cover". The man behind the game that put the cover shooter on the map sent that curt missive a couple of months before the launch of *Titanfall*, and two years later, he's been largely proven right. Shooters are increasingly defined by movement, skills and progression systems; wall running might not quite be the new cover, but Bleszinski's real point is that shooters have increasingly come to be defined by the things they let you do when you're not firing your gun. This month's Hype crop brings further proof of that fact.

*Tom Clancy's The Division* (p36) would have been a hard sell when *Call Of Duty* and *Gears Of War* reigned supreme, but in 2016, now *Destiny* has made the notion of an MMO shooter with an RNG loot system a little easier to stomach, it feels like a logical evolution. Ubisoft Massive may not have executed its grand idea as gracefully as Bungie, but what *The Division* lacks in fluidity of motion is more than made up for by a classless suite of abilities, an intriguing blend of PVE and PVP, and some smartly conceived RPG systems whirring away in the background.

Meanwhile, Blizzard's MOBA-inspired shooter *Overwatch* is now headed to consoles, and is perhaps as far removed from the Bleszinski stop-and-pop era as you can get. It has 21 playable characters, each with a bespoke set of skills, who can be switched between at any point in the action. Yes, it has guns, but it also has teleports, grappling hooks, magical spells and time powers. It's all the more thrilling for it.

For those seeking a rather more plausible interpretation of wall running, Crytek's *The Climb* is just the ticket – a VR mountaineering sim that will take you on a tour of some of the world's most famous peaks. The shooter has to change because it's been around so very long, but in the emerging VR space, simplicity, not complexity, is key.

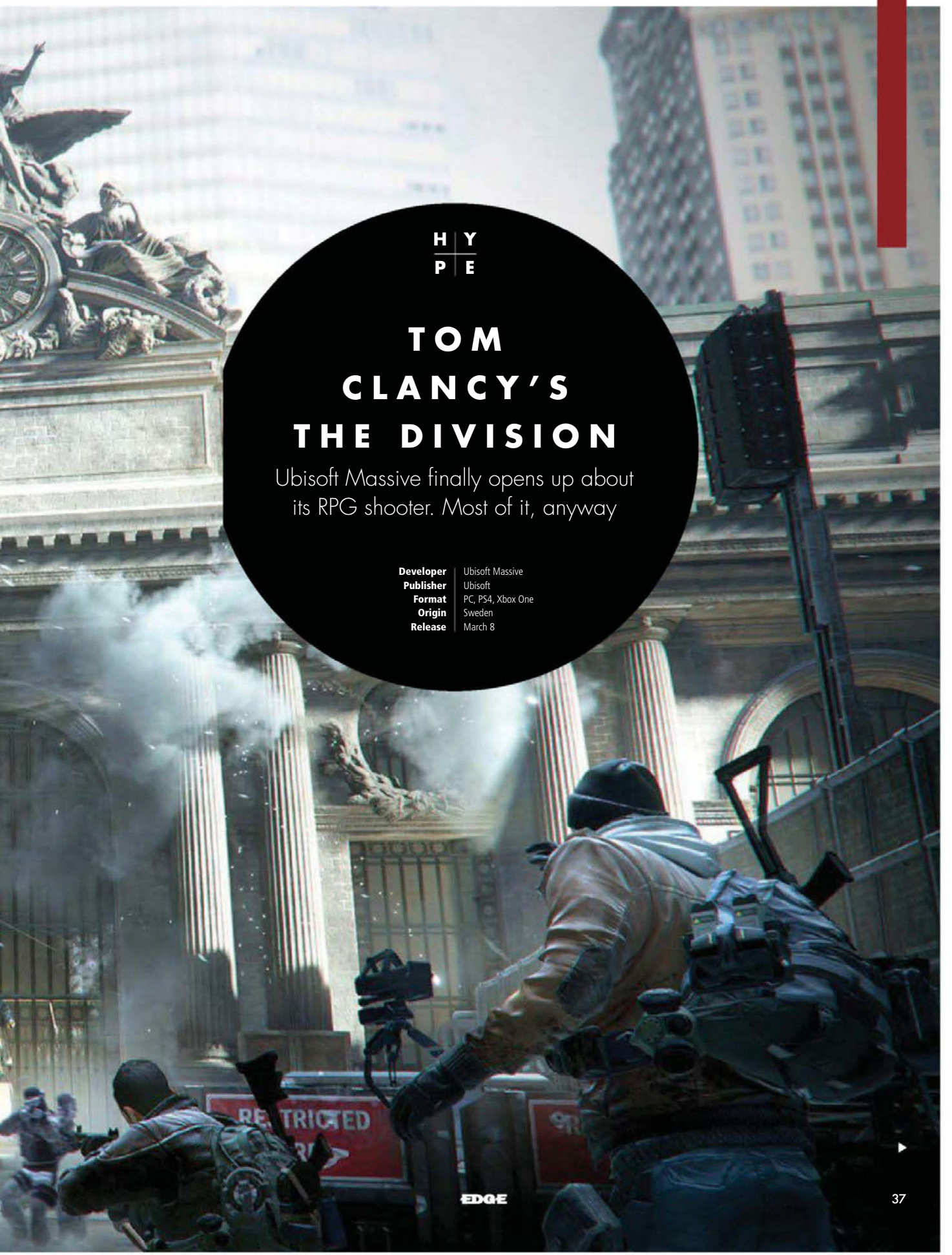
## MOST WANTED

**Tacoma** PC, Xbox One
*Gone Home*'s arrival on consoles serves as a timely reminder of The Fullbright Company's masterful ability to deliver a strikingly good yarn, and we can't wait to see what the studio can achieve within the well-stuffed sci-fi genre when the game touches down in March.

**Adrift** PC, Xbox One
Another March-bound sci-fi romp, *Adrift* doesn't have Tacoma's ensemble cast, and the surfaces of its disintegrating space station might look a little *too* pristine, but the oxygen-hunting zero-G survival title looks to be an exquisite blend of tranquil beauty and suffocating panic.

**Outlast 2** PC, PS4, Xbox One
Red Barrels' first *Outlast* outing did a great deal to shake up the horror genre, and with the *Whistleblower* DLC now behind us (along with fellow horror innovator Frictional Games' *Soma*), we're hoping for something sleep-ruiningly terrifying later this year.

A squad of agents bears down on Grand Central Station, one of several famous landmarks to be modelled in Ubisoft Massive's long-awaited shared-world shooter



H | Y
P | E

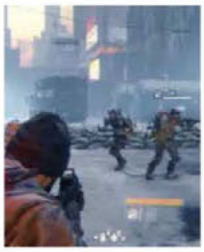
# TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

Ubisoft Massive finally opens up about its RPG shooter. Most of it, anyway

| | |
|---|---|
| **Developer** | Ubisoft Massive |
| **Publisher** | Ubisoft |
| **Format** | PC, PS4, Xbox One |
| **Origin** | Sweden |
| **Release** | March 8 |

ABOVE **Portable cover and sentry turrets, seen here on the right, are essential tools in a game that encourages a tactical mindset. A narrow formation like this is a recipe for disaster if you ask us, but who are we to question Ubi's screenshot artists?** RIGHT ***The Division*** **tells its story through brief CCTV scenes that unlock after you complete certain missions. Meanwhile, the scenery also tells its own, not-always-entirely-subtle tale**

TOM CLANCY'S
THE DIVISION



## Troll gate

You can shoot other players on sight in the Dark Zone, forming uneasy alliances with fellow agents until they've outlived their usefulness. The potential for griefing is tremendous, though creative director Magnus Jansen insists that the Xbox One alpha yielded broadly positive results: "There's a good spread of nice and not-nice people, and they do balance out." Go rogue by killing other players and you'll have a bounty put on your head. "Initially we thought about having an AI bot to go around as police, but it's better to let the players run the Dark Zone. There are some systems in place to balance it out, but not everyone's an A-hole." We tell him we admire his faith in humanity, but appreciate the contingency plan. "Well, you know. If you want peace, prepare for war."

We could shoot *The Division*'s cars all day. Abandoned vehicles line the streets of this virus-stricken New York, but are more than mere set dressing: every yellow cab, police car and soccer-mom SUV is a potential showcase of Ubisoft Massive's wonderful damage modelling, and we leave roadside after roadside in tatters. We pop the tyres first, causing a visible puff of air before the vehicle above slumps towards the damage. Then we take out the lights; the alarm might go off but never mind – we can shoot that out too. And then the windows. Oh, the windows. We empty our heavily modded assault rifle around the perimeter, and the pane holds firm until the last shard holding it in place shatters under gunfire, and the lot falls away. It's hard to tear ourselves away to the real business of *The Division*: reclaiming New York City from the assorted ne'er-do-well factions that have moved in after a smallpox outbreak. Eventually our ammo supplies run dry and we're left with no choice but to move on.

***In a pleasant surprise, it eschews much of the modern Ubisoft open-world template***

It's just as well, because we really should get going. This, after all, is a long-overdue first proper hands-on with a game announced more than two-and-a-half years ago. There was a blink-and-you'll-miss-it demo at E3 last year and a brief Xbox One alpha in December. Here, finally, is *The Division*, playable almost from the start (the tutorial isn't ready yet) in near-final form. It's certainly been a long time coming.

"There are so many new things," **Magnus Jansen**, creative director at *The Division* developer Ubisoft Massive, tells us by way of explanation for the delay in the game's release. "We're doing a new server structure – this seamless [multiplayer], no loading, no matchmaking, no lobbies. Then all the gameplay iteration, just trying to make it work. It's an open world, with co-op: does it work not being guided? Doesn't the group get split up? How do we solve that? There's just so much, getting the tech right, and the game design; building a whole new engine; new platforms for Massive, too, with PS4 and Xbox One. It's not really surprising that it's taken some time."

**Ubisoft's partnership with** Microsoft means that our demo is on Xbox One, where the game runs at 900p and the remarkable capabilities of the Snowdrop engine Massive was so keen to show off when we visited its offices for **E**259's cover story have been necessarily reined in. But this is no *Watch Dogs*-style downgrade scandal. Some of the sheen may have gone but the spirit of the thing remains, and what the Xbox One game lacks in pixel count and flashy effects is more than made up for by a wonderfully detailed, atmospheric world. The PS4 version will run in 1080p, while, mindful of its history on PC, Massive is at pains to stress the extra capabilities of the Windows version, playing up its multi-monitor support, advanced GPU effects and a fully customisable UI as evidence that it hasn't simply taken the money and run.

Yet as Jansen says, *The Division*'s long road from E3 stage to store shelf has been about more than tech. This is a remarkably complex web of interlocking systems that, in a pleasant surprise, eschews much of the modern Ubisoft open-world template. Rather than follow its publisher's house style, Massive has borrowed from elsewhere – chiefly, the loot-obsessed MMOG – and welded it to tried-and-tested, tactical *Tom Clancy* combat. Odd as it is at first to see damage numbers, rather than blood mist, when popping enemy heads in a contemporary military setting, it does work – although there's a fundamental tension between the plausible modernity of *The Division*'s setting and a set of RPG systems that are more readily associated with fantasy. An MMOG's loot curve might see you abandon a bog-standard longsword for one that is twice as long, then ditch that for one that's on fire. Here, you discard one assault rifle for another with a higher damage-per-second rating. It seems telling that DPS is measured in four figures from the word go; how else do you make modern military gear exciting in this context? ▶

**Magnus Jansen, *The Division*'s creative director, has been at Massive since 2005**

In addition to guns and gear, you can acquire new items of clothing, but if personalisation's the goal we're going to need more from the final game than the drab coats and beanies we find during our demo

The answer, early on at least, is the gun mods, through which you can tweak a weapon to suit your playstyle with new sights, barrels, grips and magazines. You can stack stability mods to tame an unruly assault rifle, perhaps, or compensate for an LMG's slow reload with a bigger clip and higher damage. Later, special bullets – causing fire or shock damage, say – will take you a little closer to the feel of a fantasy warrior's flaming sword. And once you start using legendary gear, as we do when our character is bumped to level 20 and given some new toys, perks come into play. Our assault rifle has a 12.5 per cent chance to automatically refill its magazine after a kill; a sniper rifle's crit chance increases for a few seconds when we use a skill.

"A flaming sword is impressive at a distance," Jansen says, "but with the detail you have in a thirdperson shooter, you can get really close to a gun. There's a tremendous amount of detail, with all the little dents and scratches, and the minutiae of changing the scope, the barrel and so on – we dive right into that. And in thirdperson you get so close, you really see your gun when you're shooting. The guns are spectacular on a different axis than a flaming sword, I think."

**Mods aren't bound** to a single weapon type, but can be placed on anything you pick up. The stability build you had on your weedy assault rifle can go straight onto the powerful new machine gun you just got from a boss fight – if you really want to put a 3.5x zoom sniper scope on an SMG, you can. It's a smart decision that gives you a measure of control over the loot curve, rather than forcing you to compromise on your desired playstyle for the sake of doing more damage.

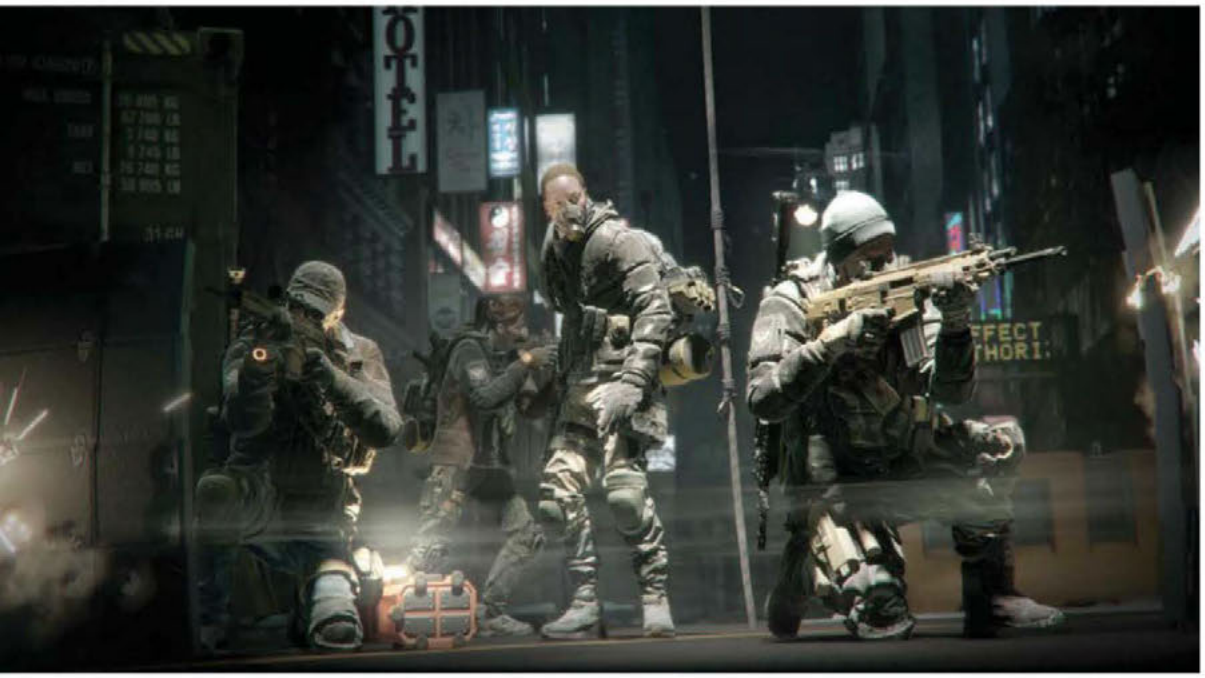
It's an ethos that extends to the skill system. *The Division* rejects the traditional class-based structure and lets you pick three abilities at a time from three separate trees, based on the holy MMOG trinity of healer (here called Medical), tank (Security) and damage-dealer (Tech), even when in combat. The final tier of each unlocks a Signature Skill, which offer tremendous benefits on a whopping 15-minute cooldown – though that can be reduced by killing enemies, with headshots bringing a bigger bonus.

They're the equivalent of *Destiny*'s Supers, in other words, which proves to be just one of many similarities between Massive's shared-world shooter and Bungie's, despite the vastly different set dressing. There's a sense *Destiny* has laid some of the groundwork for *The Division*: the console-owning shooter player has a far greater understanding of the inner workings of a loot game's power curve, and how it translates to a gunfight, than it did when *The Division* was announced. But the comparison isn't always a flattering one – movement here is stiff and unwieldy, a world apart from the Bungie game's graceful flow – and elsewhere Massive repeats things Bungie has already acknowledged as mistakes. Bullet-sponge enemies are introduced early on and get even stronger as you climb up the levels; it's an understandable consequence of measuring a bullet's damage output in five figures, but often seems at odds with the realistic setting. OK, that LMG-bearing enemy in the heavy armour is going to take some putting down, but why does that hooded sniper take minutes of sustained fire to send to the afterlife?

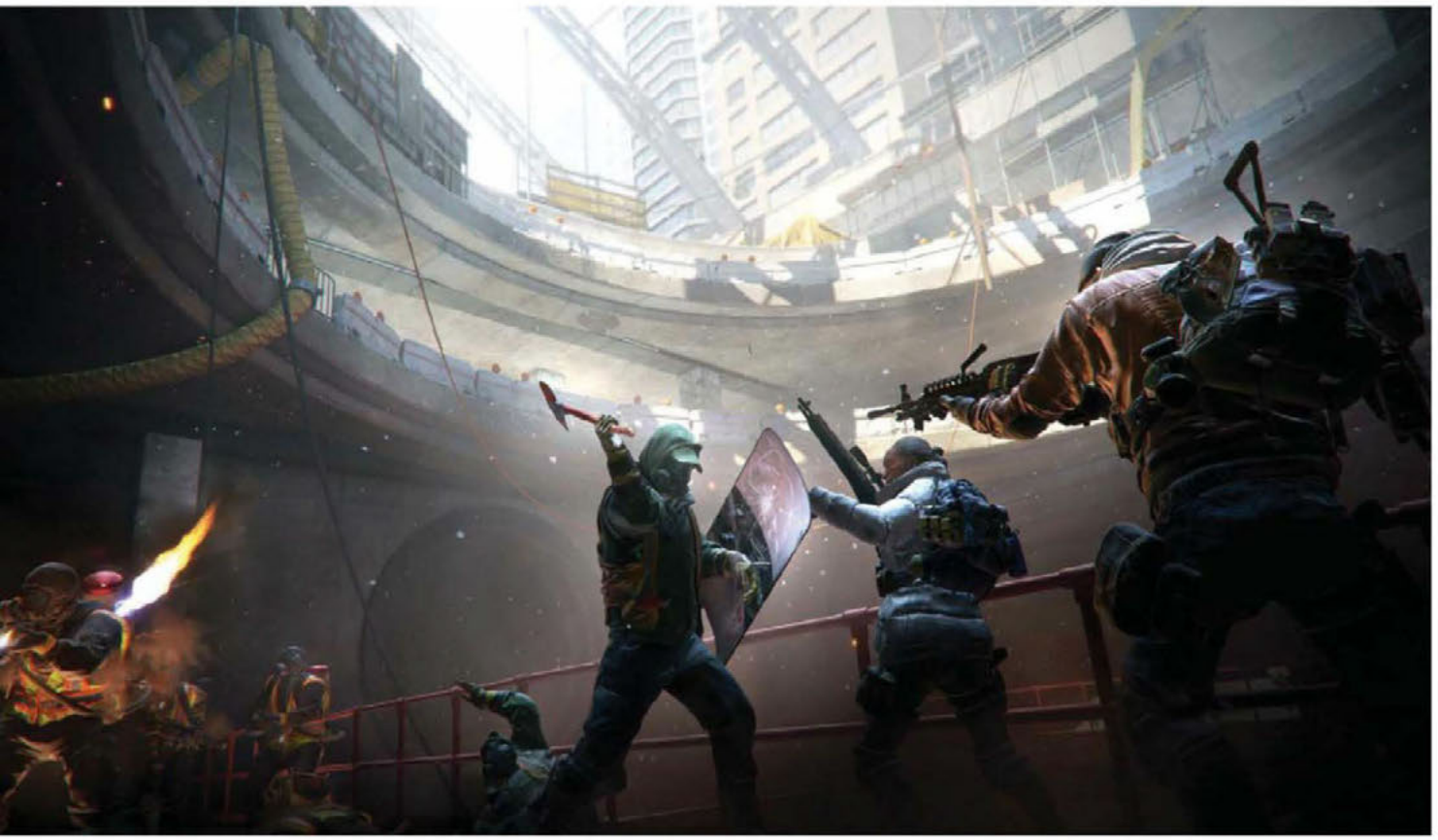
Massive's marvellous remake of New York, and the intoxicating lure of more powerful toys, means we're left wanting more, but how *much* more is impossible to say. Just weeks before launch, Massive still won't be drawn on what *The Division*'s endgame – the activities that will keep you in New York long after you hit the level cap of 30 – actually involves. All we know about for now is the Dark Zone, a central area that blends PVE and PVP in frightfully tense fashion and leads to powerful gear, providing you can stay alive and none of your allies decide to turn on you. Massive's post-launch plans include free content and features, as well as paid DLC. Beyond that, though? "There's obviously an endgame," Jansen says. "Not only like other open-world singleplayer games, but also in a social, multiplayer context. It's important that you have interesting and difficult-to-achieve goals that you and your friends can strive towards, but we're not going into details about what those activities are." Two-and-a-half years on, with launch around the corner, the silence is puzzling, and a little concerning. We can't shoot up cars forever, you know. ■

## All your base

The game opens with an assault to reclaim the James A Farley Post Office Building, opposite Madison Square Garden, in which you establish the division's Base Of Operations. After that you must rescue three experts, one each to specialise in Medical, Tech and Security. Each wing can be individually upgraded to earn new tech, mods and skills, with each improved department being kitted out with flashier tech as you progress. This means you're separated, jarringly, from your squadmates as soon as you walk inside. With the BOO established, you're free to wander New York as you please, piecing together the nonlinear narrative in any order you like.



LEFT **The Dark Zone is patrolled by several factions, including Rikers, a group of escaped convicts on a rampage, and Cleaners, who seek to wipe out the virus, and anyone who looks like they might have it, with the help of flamethrowers.** BELOW **Rushers are introduced early on, charging at you with melee weapons raised. At least this lot have riot shields – an earlier variant optimistically charges at our trio of kitted-out soldiers with just a baseball bat**



H Y
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# OVERWATCH

## Blizzard's ambitious MOBA/shooter levels up and heads to consoles

| | |
|---|---|
| **Developer/publisher** | Blizzard |
| **Format** | PC, PS4, Xbox One |
| **Origin** | US |
| **Release** | Spring |

Outside the entrance to Blizzard's California headquarters is, obviously, a giant statue of an orc. Surrounding it are a series of bronze plaques that spell out the company's values. "The primary value, that sits front and centre, is 'Gameplay First'," **Jeff Kaplan**, *Overwatch*'s game director, tells us. "Our philosophy is, do the right thing for the game, build engagement with players, and we'll find ways to be successful from there."

It is this ethos that has led to Blizzard deciding that *Overwatch*'s post-launch character and map releases will be free of charge. It is not ruling out paid DLC down the line, but for the time being everything that follows *Overwatch*'s spring launch will be free. It's a refreshingly player-focused decision, one that serves the customer before the bottom line – but it's about more than that. Kaplan firmly believes that it's the best thing Blizzard could do for the game itself. *Overwatch* may splice together two elements from two well-explored genres – the online shooter and the MOBA – but it is very much its own game.

At launch, *Overwatch* will contain 21 characters, or heroes, as Blizzard (along with the MOBA community) terms it. Each has a bespoke ability set, and each plays a specific role. You can switch freely between them at any point in a match – from attack-minded heroes to defensive or support ones as the ebb and flow of the action dictates. It's something that was central in Blizzard's decision to make *Overwatch* a full-price release instead of going free-to-play, and to give future heroes away for free instead of charging a fee. "We thought about some other business models," Kaplan says, "but the one thing that was bothering us was hero swapping. It feels like you need a certain number of heroes to really be viable in the game, to feel competitive.

"Is that number 21? I don't think so, but let's say it's three or four. I think it's going to be a different three or four depending on the type of player – some might be really skilled, twitchy players; others might like to play a support role. We can't read minds, can't know which three or four characters *you* are going to need to be successful. Giving everyone all the heroes just felt like the right thing to do."

***Overwatch* game director Jeff Kaplan**

**This has been** a novel project for Blizzard, with a more open attitude to development than it has been known for in the past. Beta tests have brought valuable feedback on game flow and balance – and Kaplan is enthused not just by the amount of feedback Blizzard has had on the game, but also by its quality. Load up the busy *Overwatch* subreddit and, rather than profane calls for Blizzard to nerf this or buff that, there are suggestions on ▶

Mercy plays a support role, with an energy beam that can either heal a teammate or buff their damage. Her Ultimate move brings downed allies back to life with full health

Mercy's Devil skin, one of many new looks available through *Overwatch*'s new progression system

the minutiae of how things could be changed for the better. "It's extremely intelligent," Kaplan says. "Players have been so thoughtful in their feedback. I really appreciate it because it's like we're speaking the same language; I love that people have an awareness of, and appreciation for, game design."

And, from the outside at least, it's been sorely needed. With 21 characters, each with a bespoke set of skills, and the player being able to switch between them at will, *Overwatch* sounds like a nightmare of a balancing job. Yet Kaplan tells us it actually makes his job easier, pointing to the community's current bête noire, Bastion, a robot that can transform into a static turret. Players complain that there is only one viable counter to its turret form. Kaplan reels off almost ten.

"If we only had, say, four heroes in the game, the balance would be very delicate," he says. "I think there's a hill that you crest;

> ***"From the inception of the game, we were designing with the console controller in mind"***

when you have so many heroes, it actually becomes *easier* to balance. We're not making rock, paper, scissors. That's not how the game is designed. It's about different dynamics and fluid team combinations. It's not a question of whether, say, Mercy can go 1v1 against D.Va. That's just not a situation we even want to support. It's more a question of, can a team with D.Va beat one with Mercy? The answer is yes, absolutely, and it goes both ways."

The beta tests have, however, brought to light problems elsewhere in the game. Blizzard has already made and abandoned two levelling systems. The first wedded progression to the power curve and so tilted the balance towards those that played the most. The next gave each hero their own levelling path, which punished players for moving around the character roster – something that should be rewarded. Kaplan is optimistic that the new system will stick, with a single, account-wide levelling curve with no cap that offers a selection of random, cosmetic loot (see 'Third time's a charm') each time you rank up.

A planned January return for the beta had to be put back until early February, but it promises to be worth the wait. In addition to the new progression system it also adds two new maps – one set high in the Himalayas, the other in urban China – and a new game mode that should show *Overwatch* at its best.

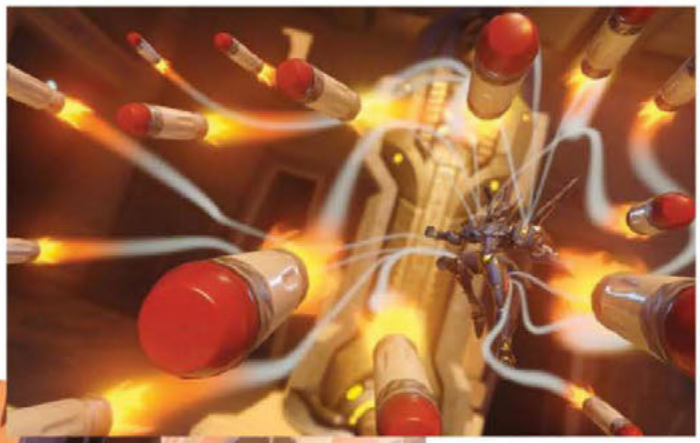
**Control is most** readily comparable to King Of The Hill, with two teams of six fighting to capture a single point in the centre of a symmetrical map. Matches are the best of three rounds, each of which involves a different capture point in a different area. The China map starts in a street market, moves to a corporate retreat, and if a final round is needed, concludes on the top of a skyscraper. It's not a new idea, but it's a perfect fit for *Overwatch*. Focusing both teams on a single chokepoint means more of the 6v6 team fights in which the game shines, while hero swapping means players can alternate between attack and defence depending on who has control of the zone.

The February beta will be PC-only, though Kaplan hopes consoles will receive a similar treatment before *Overwatch*'s launch this spring. It could certainly do with one: PC players will more readily understand a blend of shooter and MOBA than those on consoles, where the latter remains largely unexplored. It would be much-needed marketing for a game announced as a PC title, made by a company best known for its work on PC, and whose console release was revealed at the largely PC-focused Blizzcon in November. Console players could do with a primer.

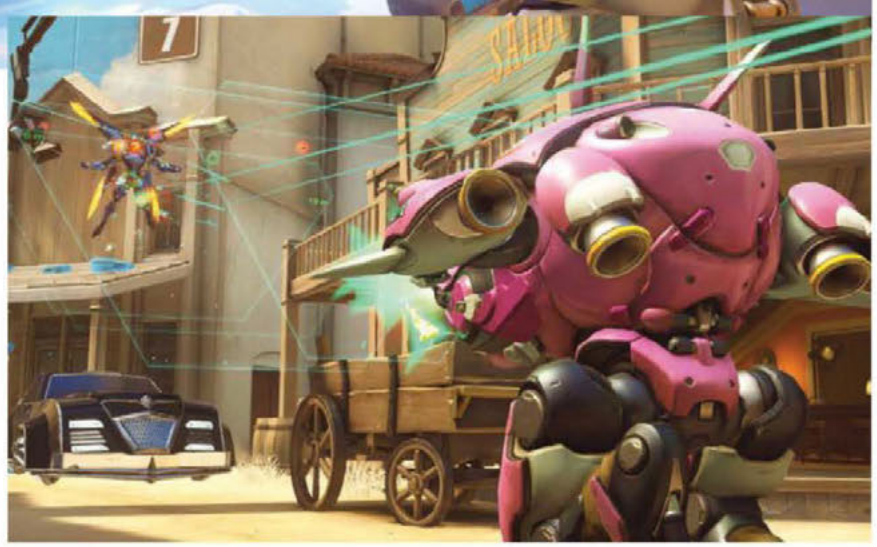
This is no hasty port, either. Kaplan says Blizzard was designing *Overwatch* for the console player long before deals were in place with Microsoft and Sony. "From the inception of the game, we were designing with the console controller in mind," he says. "We felt that, even if the game never made it to console, by limiting how many abilities characters could have to ensure it would fit on a controller, we would make a better PC game." Once again, Blizzard has taken a business decision and re-framed it as a question of how best to serve the player, and the game. From what we've seen, it's been a success. That orc at the studio entrance is sure to approve. ■

### Third time's a charm

Blizzard's third crack at *Overwatch*'s progression system sees levelling up rewarded with a loot crate containing four purely cosmetic items of various rarities. In addition to expected fare such as character skins and emotes, you'll also chance upon new VO snippets, poses for the end-of-match victory screen, and custom animations for when your work is featured in the Play Of The Game video clip. Emblems, meanwhile, can be spray-painted onto level furniture. Any RNG-inspired frustration will be mitigated by an unlock system that lets you trade in duplicates towards the item your heart desires. It's smart, non-invasive stuff, and it's hard to see it not sticking this time.



TOP **Pharah's Ultimate ability, Barrage, is a devastating multi-rocket salvo.**
ABOVE CENTRE **Cyborg ninja Genji unleashes his Ultimate.**
ABOVE **Reinhardt is a classic tank, with a giant hammer, shield and one of the game's largest health pools.**
MAIN **Team fights should be a more frequent sight in the new Control mode, since both teams are battling over a single capture point**



TOP **A reskinned Tracer poses on Shambali Monastery, one of the beta's new maps.**
RIGHT **D.Va is a former pro player who these days uses her thumbskill to pilot a pink mech suit, though she can get out and fight on foot too**

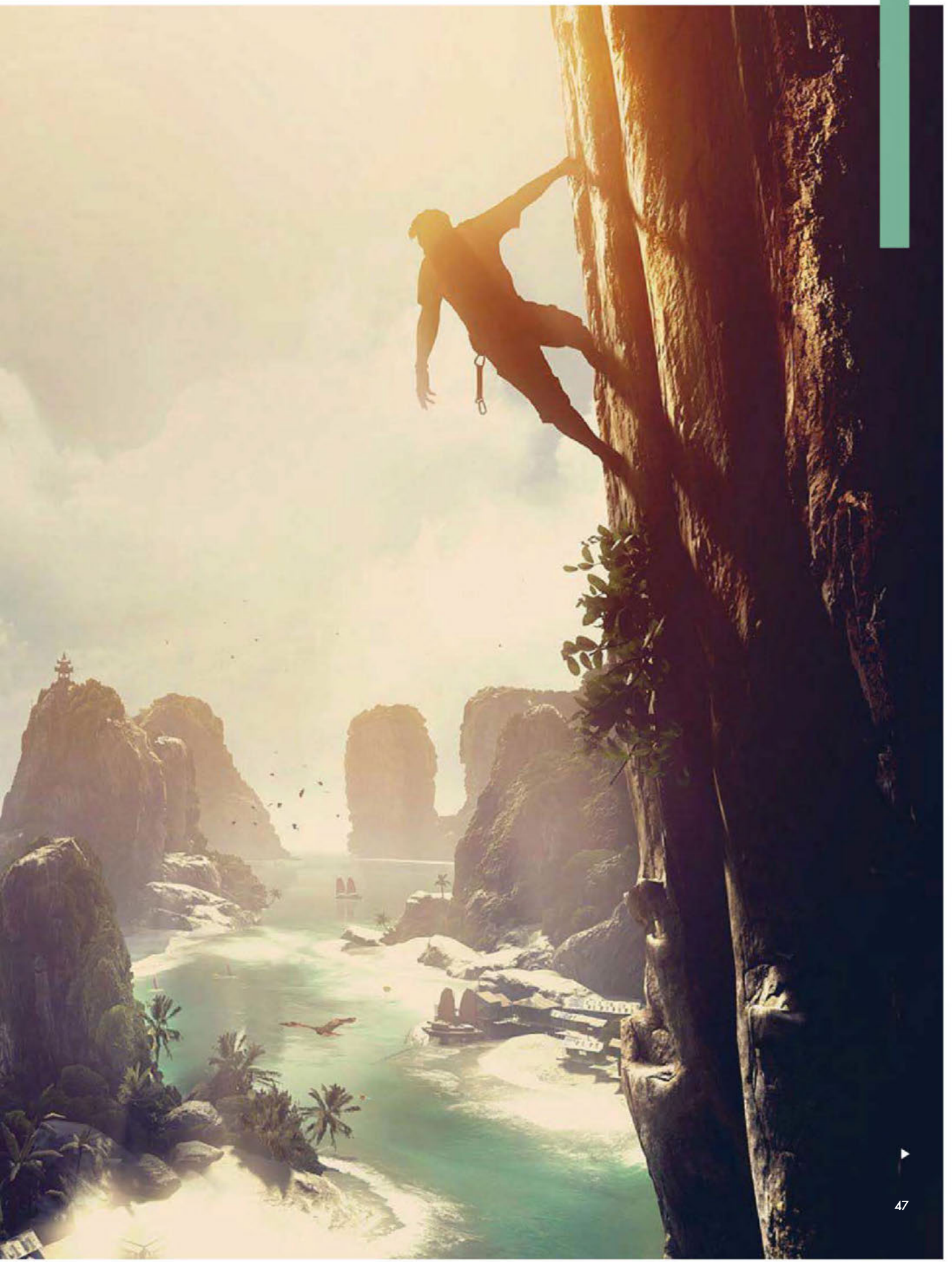
H|Y
P|E

# THE CLIMB

## Crytek reaches for new heights in virtual reality

| | |
|---|---|
| **Developer/publisher** | Crytek |
| **Format** | PC |
| **Origin** | Germany |
| **Release** | 2016 |

***The Climb*** **is one of the prettiest VR projects we've seen, making it a pleasure simply to lock your grip and gawp**



There will be multiple mountains to climb in each location, and each one will feature a variety of potential routes

A product of Crytek's virtual reality experimentation, *The Climb* has graduated from prototype to fully fledged Oculus Rift launch title. The game repurposes the glorious landscapes with which the studio made its name, dispensing with stealth and guns in favour of free climbing. The threat of bullets might have gone away but perched hundreds of metres above the ground and clinging to a rock face by your finger tips is no less dangerous a task.

"The cool part about *The Climb* is that it really allows you to feel that same kind of tension that I see in the Climbing World Cup bouldering finals," executive producer **Elijah Freeman** tells us. "You think, 'I'm going to reach for this, I'm going to try for that hold,' and the experience is very visceral. It really makes you believe that you're there."

So convincing, in fact, that the team watched on in amusement as players' thumbs whitened while tightly gripping their controller during demos. You might need to break out the chalk ball while playing, then, but the controls are simple and intuitive. Each of your disembodied hands is mapped to a trigger – when you squeeze it, you'll grasp the rock face. You aim your free hand by looking around, and if you need to make a risky transfer to another hold, simply tap the jump button, let go and then quickly grasp the trigger again.

***You can chalk your free hand by tapping the shoulder button, and then switch grip***

Executive producer Elijah Freeman

Leaping and performing difficult manoeuvres will increase your heart rate and cause protagonist Aln to sweat more, resulting in slippery hands and a greater chance of falling. You can chalk your free hand by tapping the shoulder button, and then switch grip in order to attend to the other hand. The need to ensure you have enough grip for your next move makes the process of ascending each course more involved than simply bounding from hold to hold, adding a light layer of strategy and decision-making to your timed runs. While chalking is currently the only form of inhibiting stamina active in the game, the studio is investigating other potential mechanics for the finished build. And, of course, the game will also support Rift's Touch controllers when they're released later this year.

**While the only** peak to be revealed so far is set in Vietnam's Halong Bay, the finished game will include several different mountains to attempt from across the globe, and you'll be able to choose your route up each one as you navigate the game's open environments in your own way. While *The Climb* is a solid demonstration of how developers can imbue VR worlds with convincing physicality, it also has the potential to be something of a dual gateway, both demonstrating the potential of virtual reality and sparking an interest in solo rock climbing and bouldering for those who have yet to try it for real.

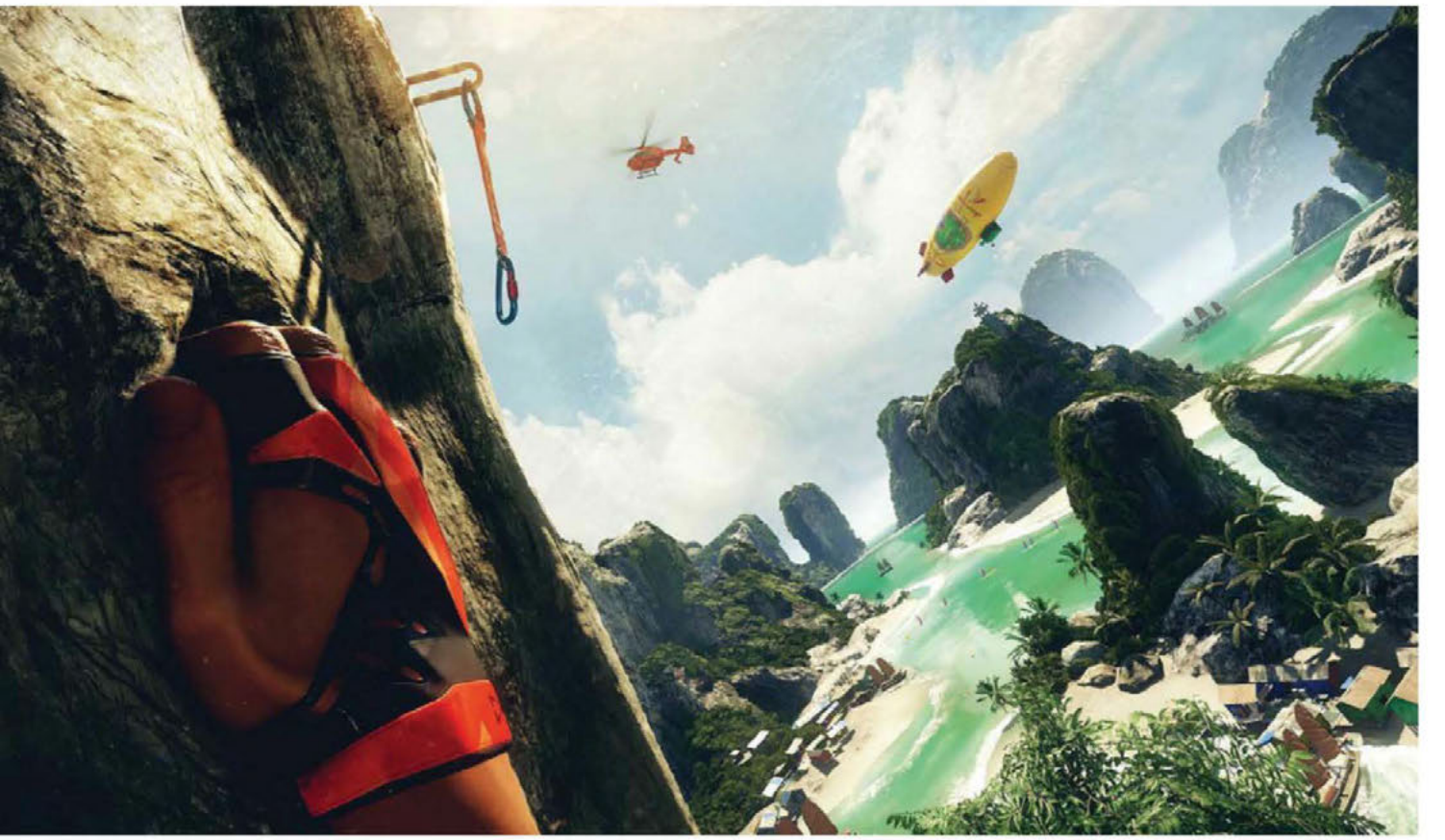
"I agree – it feels like it's going to be that crossover game. I think there's some crossover that's going to happen," Freeman says. "We have subject-matter experts in-house who are rock climbers and they *love* it. The open world and the fact that you can choose more than one route or course up the mountain – they love that idea, and they're trying things that they wouldn't try in the real world, taking a lot more risks. So it's open to all kinds of players. If you want to just try to navigate up, and you want to experience the beautiful vistas and the wonder of virtual reality, that option is available to you. However, if you're adventurous, and you really want to try some difficult moves, then you can do that too."

But while climbers might not be daunted by towering elevations and the need to contort themselves to work with available holds, the towering pricetag of an Oculus Rift allied with a capable PC might yet prove a stretch too far. However, Freeman is confident that it won't be a limiting factor.

"My purview is development, so I really don't know how that's going to impact the game," he says. "But to me, if you build good content, the players will come. And that's exactly what we're doing – building something that's awesome." ■

### The only way is up

Compared to a project like *Crysis*, *The Climb* is a refreshingly modest proposition, but one that Crytek feels equally as confident with. "I think that when you come up with an idea that works, its complexity isn't generally relevant," Freeman says. "It might be complex, it might not, but once you have something that works, if it's simplistic it's all the better. And even though *The Climb*'s concept is simplistic, we were able to embellish on all the things that made it fantastic. Like the environment, all the nuances, the sense of interacting with physical items on a cliff face. The idea of playing with vertigo. All of these things combine to make something that's really fun to play."



ABOVE **While *The Climb* emerged out of a prototyping phase, the lessons the studio is learning from it are being fed back into other projects and fuelling new ideas for in-game player locomotion.** LEFT **It may just be a game, but *The Climb*'s dizzying drops are still capable of putting knots in your stomach. Maybe better to stay focused on the view to the top**

HYPE

# HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION

## Resisting oppression in riotous four-guerrilla co-op

| | |
|---|---|
| **Developer** | Dambuster Studios |
| **Publisher** | Deep Silver |
| **Format** | PC, PS4, Xbox One |
| **Origin** | UK |
| **Release** | May 20 |

There's nothing like a foreign invasion to boil the blood. Conquering forces of thuggish oppressors treading over your turf, disrupting your lifestyle, taking what isn't theirs – anyone who's had a sandwich pinched from the work fridge can relate. This being the case, how did 2011's *Homefront* fall so flat, and what is its sandbox sequel *The Revolution* doing to make you care?

Well, in answer to the first question, we challenge you to name a single character or scenario from the first shooter, besides the infamous 'press X to hide in mass grave'. By contrast, powerful writing is *The Revolution*'s priority. "I think it's down to having an interesting place to stage the narrative, and then populating that with, as in any form of media, interesting characters," Dambuster narrative designer **Stephen Rhodes** tells us. "People want to experience stories about characters that they can invest in or root for or hate, and I think that's really the key to any good narrative or any good storytelling. To have characters that people want to feel emotion for and that will invoke a reaction based on those characters' influences and what they do within the game world."

It's a little odd, then, to find that Dambuster has provided us with undeniably linear co-op missions for our hands-on, a series of self-enclosed ten-minute sessions from the perspective of completely silent create-a-character types.

First, however, a little context. Set two years after the events of *Homefront*, and four years into the occupation of the US by the Greater Korean Republic (GKR), Korea is pushing into the east coast after losing Hawaii and Alaska back to the American resistance. Philadelphia is now the GKR's primary base of operations – and the territory you want back.

**We start by** choosing our trade. Pick an ex-baseball player as your template and grenades go farther. Electricians hack better. We opt for a one-time cage fighter for greater hand-to-hand skill, and sure enough, melees are brutal. Spawning in skid row immediately attracts the ire of a shoot-on-sight Korean People's Army (KPA) patrol comprised of several soldiers and an armoured personnel carrier, and getting up close, a prompt allows us to perform a contextual takedown which bashes one sentry's head against a lamppost.

Our squadmate throws a sticky jammer on the vehicle, and as it momentarily targets its own men, we skirt round and shoot explosive canisters handily (if shortsightedly) strapped to its back. Random patrols require quick thinking. Next time, two IEDs sort out the lot, but we start to run out of interesting ways to kill the third one, and by the fourth we ▶

*The Revolution* has little to do with the first game. This is an open-world shooter with a separate co-op mode in which a bunch of guerrillas wage war against the Korean People's Army

Night provides new threats. Laser-sighted drones patrol streets and snipers sweep alleys from rooftops. As an under-equipped underdog, it pays to be stealthy

simply ignore it and disappear down a side alley. Combat, at least in co-op, feels basic. Despite a near-future setting, your weapons are the standard FPS fare by dint of your ill-equipped underdog role. Homebrew gunfire packs a novel punch, but not a huge one.

As the neighbourhood opens up, we're tasked with picking off ten enemies. Deserted streets and hollowed-out buildings offer angles of attack, but stuck with a shotgun and no way to grab enemy weapons, we're forced into close-quarters play. "Obviously because of the nature of your resistance against a much larger, much more powerful force, you can't really go all guns blazing in the red zones because you're just outgunned and outmanned at every turn," Rhodes says. "So you still have to play tactically and sensibly because that's a fight you'll never win."

It's worth noting that guerrilla warfare is just one facet, but the only one we're given access to. The city is split into red, yellow and green zones. Red zones exist on Philadelphia's fringes, bleak and brutal war-torn areas where rebels fight desperate daily street battles against a heavy military presence. The GKR uses them as buffers as a form of control to limit communication, and if you want to pass between zones, you'll often have to go through a red one first. Intentional or otherwise, they're not pretty places.

***The Revolution's key point of difference is its evolving, City-17-style dystopia***

Stephen Rhodes, narrative designer

Green zones contain landmarks, but Dambuster isn't ready to talk about those yet, while yellow zones are more populated, controlled areas. "They're very heavily KPA-policed so there's a lot of propaganda, there are lots of patrols, there are lots of drones checking up on people," Rhodes says. "The people are free to live there and have their own space but there are too many of them; there's not enough housing, so it's cramming a lot of people into a small area." It sounds like *The Revolution*'s most interesting zone of the three, a persistent space in which picking off lone soldiers to thin numbers, hacking military stations, and exploding RC cars leaves visible traces on the world.

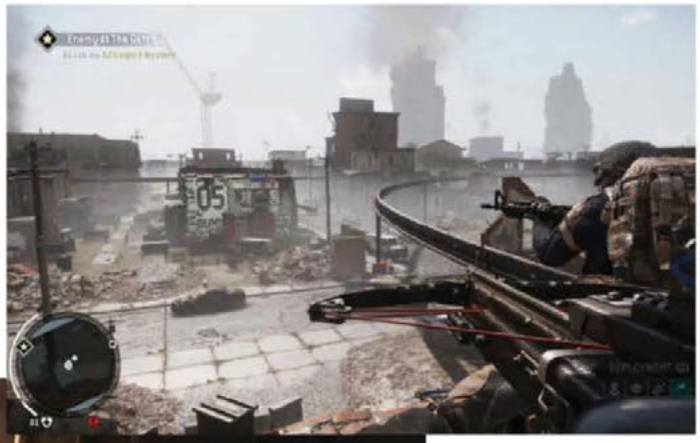
**But, nope, back** to co-op. Another mission sees us ride dirtbikes to the finish, but a teammate steals ours so we're left running after them until we drop dead because the game decides there's too much distance between us (an option for backies is absent, sadly). Our final mission is a three-parter: sneak into a KPA base, steal two vehicles, then escort them out. There are several infiltration routes, and versatile climbing makes fine use of Philadelphia's architecture. Options reduce when we find the vehicles. They drive themselves out and come under fire by KPA, so we have to mount a defence while walking alongside. Three times we play, and three times the convoy's health bar dwindles and we have to restart.

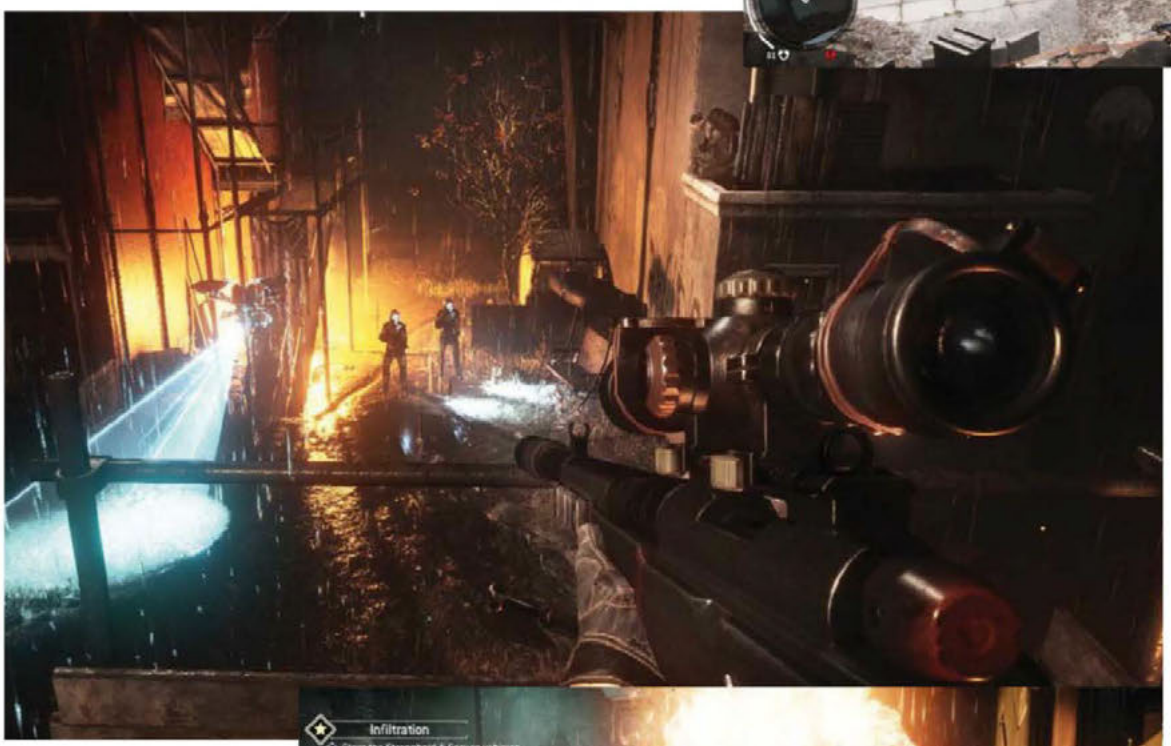
We come away thinking that what we've seen isn't representative of the wider game's strengths. *The Revolution*'s key point of difference from *Homefront* is its evolving, City-17-style dystopia. We want to experience the strong writing Rhodes speaks of, the emotionally impactful story in which "you get to see the city, how it's changed and how the KPA have affected it, and see how that affects the people and how they live their lives under this occupation," and the "incidental dialogue that you will encounter from the people who inhabit occupied Philadelphia who will relay their stories and their experiences to the player." We'll have to wait for that.

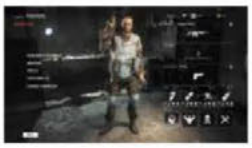
*The Revolution* is certainly a departure – it has a new developer in Dambuster (formerly Crytek UK and, before that, Free Radical) and a new setting in 2029 Philadelphia. In fact, barring the name and the invasion narrative, so little remains from a story standpoint that it feels a little odd that the name wasn't dropped altogether, since it's hardly videogaming's most prestigious. If the cheesy first instalment was Red Dawn, *The Revolution* professes to be more The Man In The High Castle, a thought-provoking 'what if?' that starts with a well-realised setting and takes it from there. At least, that's what Dambuster says, and with co-op proving fun but forgettable during our hands-on time with the game, that's what it will need to deliver. ■

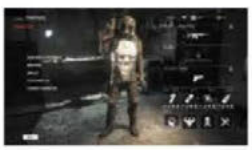
## Awkward past

Although this is Dambuster's first game, the studio's staff have a storied past. They shipped the likes of *TimeSplitters, Second Sight* and *Haze* as Free Radical, and worked on *Crysis* and *Warface* as Crytek UK. In 2014 the studio's German parent company, suffering financial problems after overexpansion, sold the *Homefront* name to publisher Deep Silver (barely a year after it had acquired it from the bankrupt THQ) and closed the studio. It prompted a mass migration to Dambuster, a studio hastily set up by Deep Silver in July 2014, where development of *Homefront: The Revolution* continues. Despite separating from Crytek, Dambuster still utilises the latest iteration of CryEngine today.

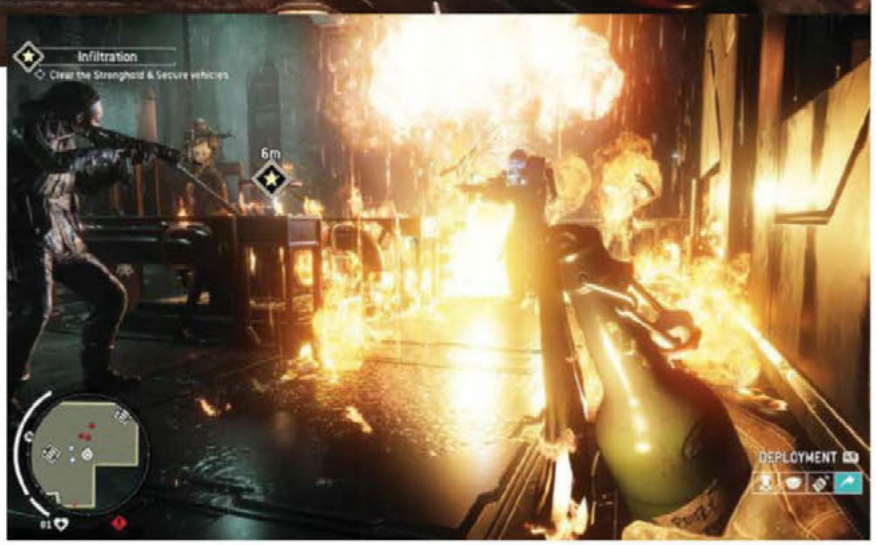








TOP **Bleak and brown, this Korean-occupied Philadelphia might bear the scars of violent struggles, but it's not particularly interesting to look at.**
RIGHT **A homebrewed aesthetic highlights the gulf between you and your well-funded foes. Cobbled-together weapons are made out of rubber bands and screws, the hands that grip them blackened with dirt**




TOP **The built-up setting of Philadelphia offers 360 degrees of fight and flight. You can crawl through tunnels, climb up fire escapes, and roar down the main street on a dirtbike.**
ABOVE CENTRE **Alas: microtransactions. Three tiers of Gear Crate costing 1,000, 1,500, or 2,250 points unlock vanity items including vests, belts, backpacks, gloves, boots, sunglasses and knee pads.**
ABOVE **Since you earn in the region of 1,000 points per mission, you needn't spend real money. Which is just as well, since this is a full-priced game.**
MAIN **On-the-fly customisation sees you holding weapons in front of your face and swapping out parts in real time**

**Developer**
Silicon Studio
**Publisher** Square Enix
**Format** 3DS
**Origin** Japan
**Release** Out now (JPN), February 26 (EU)

# BRAVELY SECOND: END LAYER

## A thoroughly efficient follow-up, for better and worse

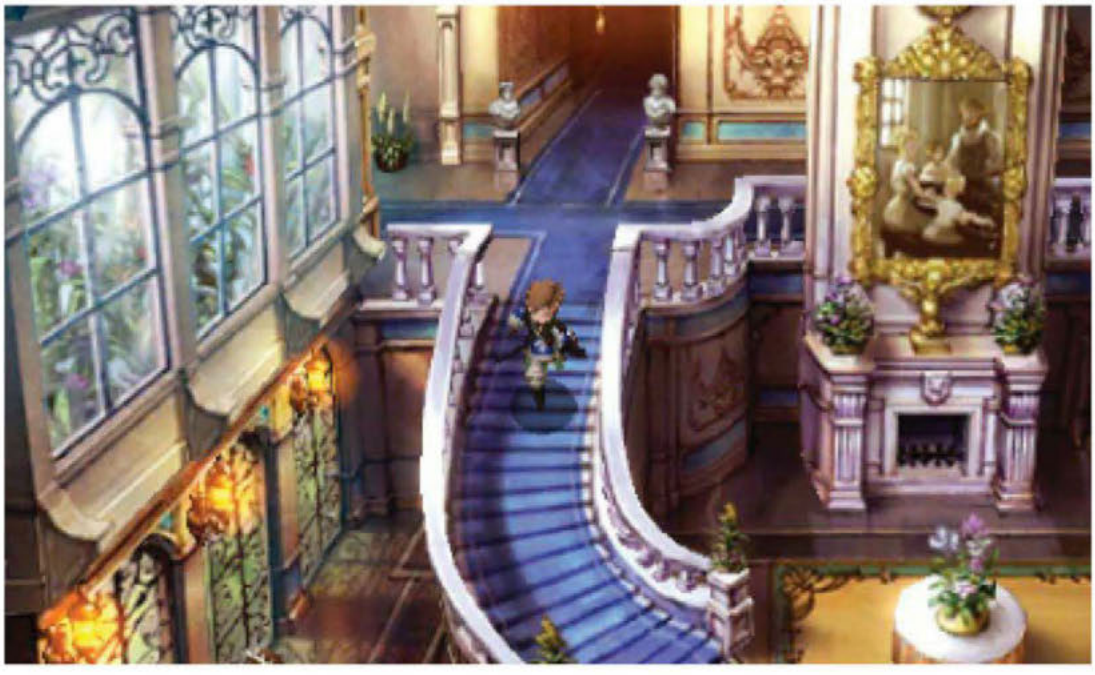
*Bravely Default* may have been a cumbersome title, but it was an apt one for a Japanese roleplaying game that spent as much time falling back on established ideas as it did attempting to streamline and refine the systems that had, in part, caused the genre to fall out of favour in the west. In most regards, this follow-up isn't nearly so bold, feeling more like an expansion than a sequel. And yet it continues the original's fine work with a raft of subtle but meaningful improvements that trim the grind still further, while empowering the player to set their own pace. Efficiency is rarely the first thing we look for in a JRPG, but *Bravely Second*'s moreishness speaks much for the shrewdness of its designs.

Like its predecessor, the game accepts that random encounters can grow tiresome over time. Once an optimal setup is found, simply repeating it over and over is enough to progress until you reach a new region and higher-level opponents, or face a guardian, where more advanced tactics are required. Here, you're positively encouraged to find the most potent mix of jobs, skills, buffs and perks, before setting them to be automatically deployed whenever your party stumbles across an enemy. This time, you can save three preset move lists, which should be sufficient to take you through the world map to the next dungeon, while you're also able to nominate favourite job setups for your party, completely changing its dynamic without the onerous process of reallocating secondary abilities and re-equipping weapons and gear.

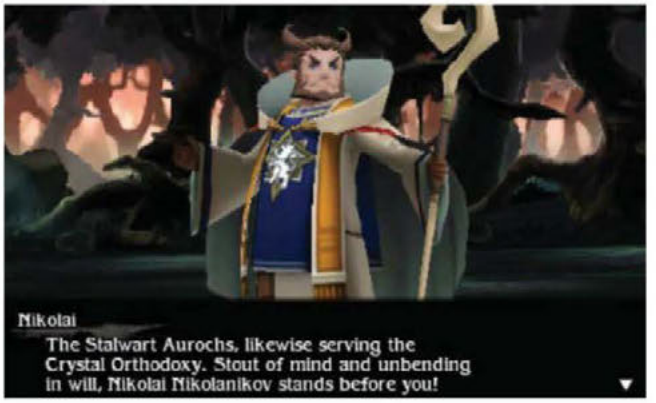
Chain battles offer another opportunity to accelerate your progress. Defeat your

**Teenage knight Yew is a likeable but archetypal lead. He's headstrong yet naive, with an apparent gravy obsession – a localisation quirk seemingly designed to generate a meme**

ABOVE **There's a narrative justification for your ability to adjust the encounter rate: a reawakened Tiz can now manipulate the weak-minded. A certain seminal space opera is referenced in the dialogue**



You can now set the trigger conditions for special moves, tailoring them according to your current job and preferred battle strategies


Nikolai
The Stalwart Aurochs, likewise serving the Crystal Orthodoxy. Stout of mind and unbending in will, Nikolai Nikolanikov stands before you!

TOP LEFT **Though you'll visit a few old stomping grounds, the dungeon design is a marked improvement over the uninspiring labyrinths of the original game.** ABOVE ***Bravely Default*'s mid-game twist suggested you should be wary of who to trust, but the sequel isn't hanging about, revealing a shocking betrayal before the game has properly begun**

opponents within a single turn, and you'll be offered the chance to fight another group, albeit with the not-insignificant handicap of a debit to your brave points from the previous skirmish. But with the chance to multiply experience, cash and job points, it's hard to resist staying in the fight until you've more than doubled your prize.

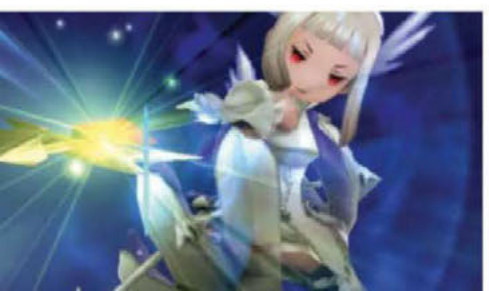
If you're merely trying to boost a character's job level, you can turn off the XP and cash boosts, head to an area with low-level enemies, increase the encounter rate by 100 per cent and barely lift a finger for the next half-hour. Indeed, adjustments to the interface mean it can now be played entirely one-handed, with the D-pad and left shoulder used to select menu options. Individually, these changes may not seem like much, but the cumulative effect makes *Bravely Second* one of the most accessible and malleable games of its kind.

**There are new** jobs, of course, alongside plenty of the old ones. Wizards cast elemental spells that can be crafted into different forms to suit the type of battle, though such power comes at a cost, doubling your BP spend and greedily chewing through your MP gauge. Fencers adopt bestial stances to boost speed, attack and defence, while Charioteers can equip a third weapon to the head slot. Soon after, you'll be deploying cats, cakes and cowboys, though 'soon' is relative: the prologue chapter took us five hours to finish, and there are six more, some of them substantially longer.

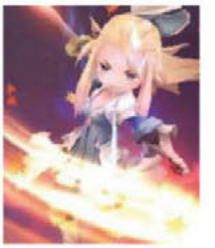
Sidequests, meanwhile, reacquaint you with characters such as Kamiizumi and Mephilia, and take the form of ideological dilemmas. In the first, reformed bandit Jackal wants to pilfer a special gem to provide water for thirsty desert dwellers, while Red Mage DeRosa is seeking to harness its energy for a risky experiment designed to create an equal society for all. In theory, you're invited to side with the character offering the more persuasive case, but with the other asterisk being locked out until New Game+, you're far more likely to fight the one whose job would benefit you most in battle.

***It's hard to resist staying in the fight until you've more than doubled your prize***

Still, these stories are adeptly sketched, and afforded a deeper significance than a dozen identikit fetch quests. And if it's disappointing that the main narrative should renege on the early promise of an all-new cast for this *Default* follow-up, there's a fresh dynamic to your party of four that will allow most to forgive the surfeit of pop-culture nods and winks. Two chapters in, it's a close second to its predecessor – a little *too* close, in truth – but those simply relishing the chance to tinker with one of the finest turn-based combat systems around will be happy to see it revert to type. ■



**Self-proclaimed 'Ba'al buster' Magnolia Arch is the second new party member, arriving on a clandestine beast-killing mission, prompting a return of the original's town-building aside – though, on this occasion, home is the Moon**



## Sage stuffing

One of the more curious additions is a minigame that sees your party forming a production line, hand-crafting plushes of the series' timid Chomper enemies. You'll watch them cut, stuff, glue and paint, eventually filling boxes of 24 toys, which can be sold to fund better tools, though you'll have to dip into your profits to use them. Sporadically, you'll be able to deliver snacks to improve workrate and increase the chance of a rarer and more valuable plush. It's not entirely mindless – there's a mild tactical element when you choose to invest in premium kit – and it's oddly absorbing to watch them all at work, though thanks to a laughably poor initial exchange rate it's some time before it offers any tangible value to the player.

**Developer/publisher**
Gears For Breakfast
**Format** PC
**Origin** Denmark
**Release** 2016

# A HAT IN TIME

## A 3D platformer that's bright, breezy, and a little bit broken

Kickstarter's greatest contribution to videogames is the way it has forced the retirement of the well-worn phrase 'They don't make 'em like that any more'. Big publishers may not like the look of them, but players of a certain vintage certainly do, and Danish studio Gears For Breakfast won approval and funding from over 9,000 of them. In the process it raised just shy of $300,000 to make *A Hat In Time*, a cheerily old-school 3D platformer whose Kickstarter pitch wears the label 'collectathon' as a badge of honour. Take that, accepted wisdom.

Which is not to say that *A Hat In Time* is somehow counter-cultural; it's simply reviving the cultural standards of a couple of decades ago and giving them a new lick of paint with modern processing power. Aesthetically, it's a blend of every N64 and GameCube platform-adventure you've ever loved, at 60fps in 1080p.

***It's a blend of every N64 and GameCube platform-adventure you've ever loved***

Structurally, it's familiar stuff, too. Our hat-wearing heroine is on her spaceship, headed to her home planet with a full stock of fuel when she strays too close to a hostile planet. One of its inhabitants takes exception, breaks in and the resultant loss of pressure sucks your precious power sources – little glimmering egg timers called Time Pieces – out of the ship, into space, and to the planets below. To the girl, they're fuel; to the player, they're mission objectives, like *Mario 64*'s Stars. Find the first few and you'll have enough in the tank to restore power to another part of the ship, and from there a new planet. So far, so familiar.

The missions themselves are a little uneven – understandably for a game in beta – but there's promise here, thanks largely to the way they're built around the protagonist's growing ability. Some tools – a grappling hook for rope-swinging across gaps, an umbrella for thwacking baddies – are doled out as you progress, and always available. Others are found out in the world through badges and can be switched between in the pause menu. One lets you use the umbrella as a makeshift parachute to extend jumps; another restores health when defeating an enemy. More will feature in the final game, and Gears For Breakfast will do well to use them as well as it does the Snatcher's Realm badge. With it you can drop a portal and teleport back to it later on – a device that proves the difference in an otherwise unwinnable race level.

**Most of the** beta's missions conform to the 'collectathon' part of the sales pitch – go here, get up there, then either find the Time Piece or beat the foes that guard it – though it's not afraid to be a platformer at times. Sadly these are some of the least satisfying part of the current game, with miserly checkpointing and an awkward thirdperson camera scuppering some smartly designed sections that recall *Super Mario Sunshine*'s void levels. A (literally) on-rails escape through a train whose driver has triggered a self-destruct sequence is a maddening exercise in trial-and-error frustration that has you wondering if there isn't a very good reason for why this genre has been largely consigned to history.

Elsewhere, the tight budget means some corners have been cut. The inhabitants of Mafia Town all share the same moustachioed character model, and voice acting is atrocious across the board. Despite all that, there's a tremendous amount here to like. Gears For Breakfast has plenty on its plate as it builds towards launch, but this is a cheery, charming, riotously colourful adventure that has the potential to be something far more than mere nostalgic homage. ■

### Run of the milliner

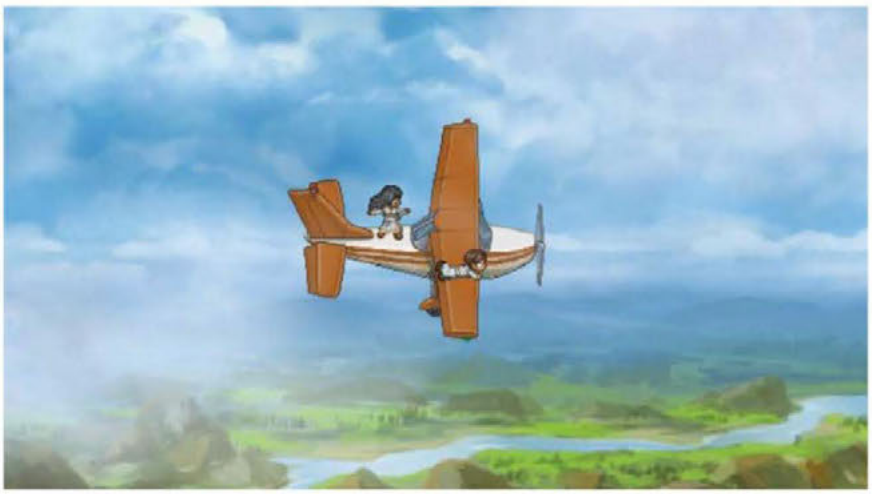
A game of this type is always going to be of interest to speedrunners, and Gears For Breakfast clearly knows it: fiddle around in the menus and you'll find the option to show a timer in the corner of the screen, or disable autosaving. Yet we wonder how the studio would've felt as the *A Hat In Time* speedrun beamed to the world from Awesome Games Done Quick last month. A string of geometric and physics glitches, including an infinite hover move that saw the player skip through huge chunks of levels at a stroke, didn't exactly cast the game in the finest light. Anything found in the beta will, the studio says, be fixed for release – but anything discovered after launch will be left untouched.

TOP **The scooter allows our heroine to cross ground and large gaps at speed, but it isn't available to try in the current build of the game.** RIGHT **This train conductor at first refuses to let you in unless you prove you're not a known troublemaker. Cue an MS Paint-style editing job on your mugshot**

TOP **Lava textures recall *Star Fox 64*. Indeed, callbacks to console games of yore are constant, making it all the stranger that *A Hat In Time* is set to be a PC exclusive.** ABOVE **The train escape is set to a tight time limit that can be extended slightly by pickups hidden in awkward spots along the way. Even when the clock isn't against you, it's a hateful experience.** ABOVE CENTRE **This kind of depth-of-field effect wasn't possible in the 3D platformer's heyday, but here it's just one of many customisable visual effects.** MAIN **Mafia Town is filled with NPCs of two stripes: either moustachioed fellows with appalling Russian accents or crows with Italian-American varieties**

## FINDING PARADISE

**Developer/publisher** Freebird Games **Format** PC **Origin** Canada **Release** Late 2016/early 2017



**Kan Gao's follow-up to the tear-jerking *To The Moon* is built upon the same central idea: two doctors venture into a patient's subconscious in order to realise their dying wish. In this instance, the patient is the young boy from 2014 interquel *A Bird Story* many years on. Though Gao insists it's an entirely self-contained narrative, he suggests that those who've played both games will benefit from the additional context. While *A Bird Story* occasionally tilted into mawkishness, *To The Moon* navigated the fine line between sadness and sentimentality with grace and poise. Either way, you should start stocking up on Kleenex.**

## THE FINAL STATION

**Developer** Do My Best Games **Publisher** TinyBuild Games **Format** PC **Origin** RUS **Release** Summer

**Resembling NimbleBit's *Pocket Trains* if it was directed by John Hillcoat, *The Final Station* casts you as a locomotive driver in a post-apocalyptic world. You're tasked with maintaining both your engine and the wellbeing of your passengers, stopping off at stations to look for supplies and other survivors. The threat of running out of fuel and rations is pervasive, but the more immediate danger in the stations is the starving infected ready to leap out of the shadows.**

## NOOZH

**Developer/publisher** Wannabe **Format** PC
**Origin** Argentina **Release** May

**This Argentinian horror adventure is one of the most exciting crowdfunded projects we've seen. Actions during the point-and-click sequences of the protagonist's daily life will inform the nightmarish dungeon-crawling sections that follow, in darkened labyrinths illuminated by a mobile phone.**

## POKKÉN TOURNAMENT

**Developer** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Publisher** The Pokémon Company **Format** Wii U **Origin** Japan **Release** March 18

**Helping to kick off *Pokémon*'s 20th anniversary celebrations, one-on-one 3D fighter *Pokkén Tournament* is making its way from arcades to Wii U in March. Four additional monsters have been revealed, swelling the playable roster to 16 – though we'd be surprised if there weren't more to come.**

## MONSTER HUNTER STORIES

**Developer/publisher** Capcom **Format** 3DS
**Origin** Japan **Release** TBA 2016

**This turn-based RPG spinoff looks startlingly pretty – suspiciously so for a 3DS game, prompting suggestions Capcom might also be targeting Nintendo's forthcoming NX. There's an extensive character customisation suite, but we're more interested in the opportunity to own a pet Nargacuga.**

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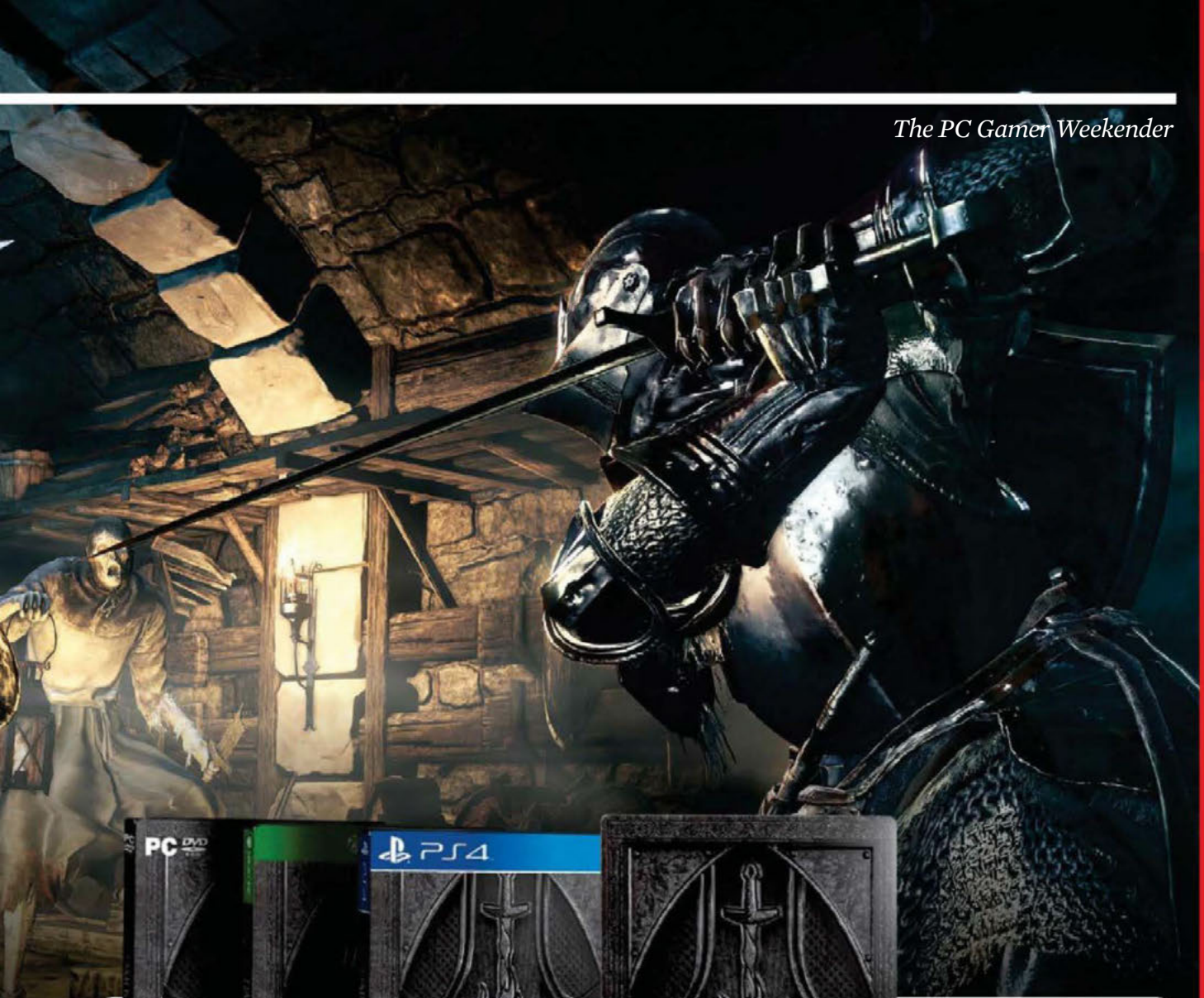

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**Game** *Doom*
**Developer** Id Software
**Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
**Origin** US
**Release** 2016

# F R O M

# H E L L

How Id Software is calling on its past to help ensure its future

By Ben Maxwell

FROM TOP **Studio art director Hugo Martin; executive producer Marty Stratton**

On stepping into Id Software's Richardson offices we're warmly welcomed by Donna Jackson, the company's larger than life — and thoroughly Texan — office manager. Better known as Miss Donna or Id Mom, she sits behind a reception desk that's positioned in front of a wall-to-wall glass cabinet stuffed full of trophies and Id history. "How y'all doing?" she asks, elated that we could make it all the way from *England* to visit. She joined the company 24 years ago, back when John Carmack was still wrestling with the task of repurposing the *Hovertank 3D* and *Catacomb 3-D* engine for what would become *Wolfenstein 3D*. Carmack, along with the rest of the company's founders, has long since left, which makes Miss Donna — fittingly sat in front of a display that includes mint-condition game packaging and model Cyberdemons — Id's longest-serving member of staff. She's the studio's last link to its formative era. We smile back, just as happy to be here as she is, but it's a sobering realisation.

Now under the auspices of ZeniMax Media, Id is a very different company to the one that spawned an entire genre from a lake house over two decades ago. More recently, *Rage* saw a studio struggling to find its place in an industry it helped to bolster, while the latest *Doom*'s protracted development initially put the company on the back foot. Now, emerging from years of development hell, the game is the first evidence of the company getting back on track after a tumultuous stretch. But given that the industry celebrities who used to personify Id have departed, who's driving the company? Who is Id today?

"It's interesting that you say, 'Who is id?' as I think that gets to part of the answer," executive producer **Marty Stratton** tells us. "Id has always been a relatively small company and the people, historically, who've been here are pretty big personalities. I'd say that Id was previously kind of a 'who' and now I feel like we're more of a team in what we're doing. We really try to put it all into the game and let the game speak for itself. There are definitely 'whos' — we've got extraordinary people, extraordinary talent, like we've always had — but the important thing is what we do as a unit, not necessarily as individuals. *Doom* is bigger than any one of us."

That weight of expectation was felt keenly back in 2011, when three years of work on a new *Doom* project was deemed unworthy of the series' name and effectively scrapped. Two years later, despite the fresh start, the project was still mired in development difficulties and tension between studio management and ZeniMax. Further pressure was placed on the studio by the relative commercial failure of *Rage* and the subsequent publisher-enforced cancellation of *Rage 2*. But, having now reorganised the way it works and refocused its efforts on what it does best, Id is bouncing back. And this change of approach has resulted in a game that appears to be absolutely worthy of carrying the iconic *Doom* logo.

"Top to bottom, every person here makes significant contributions to the game," Stratton continues. "We're lucky we're still the size that everybody knows each others' names and can fit in the kitchen for birthday celebrations. I think that camaraderie and our respect for the franchise are what's most exciting. For anybody who's been a part of *Doom* or had a *Doom* story over the past 22 years, I think they're going to play this game and be like, 'OK, this is what I would expect a modern *Doom* experience to feel like.'"

**One of the** elements that defined the original *Doom* was the technology that brought it to life on the screen. Carmack's astonishing coding proficiency enabled Id to create a game that looked, and moved, like nothing else. Despite his absence, the new *Doom* is built on a Carmack-authored engine, too — a reworked version of Id Tech 5, the tech that underpins *Rage* and Carmack's parting gift to the studio. And even without Carmack's involvement at the company nowadays, Id remains dedicated to pushing technological boundaries.

"John was hugely influential, obviously," Stratton says. "His fingerprints were a big part of everything that *Doom* was, and you can't make a [new] *Doom* game that's inspired by an original *Doom* without saying that Carmack is a part of it, because it would be silly to deny years and years of technical expertise and influence. But when he left, we basically just said, 'OK, let's move on.' John was a very well-known part of Id — to a lot of people he *was* Id. But there are a lot of people here who worked alongside John who were less well-known but learned a lot from him and were a massive part of building the technologies that we're known for. They're now leading our new technology team, which I think is as strong as ever, frankly."

Along with the (relatively) old guard, Stratton also points out the studio "got lucky" with a number of hires around the time of Carmack's departure and, as a result, along with opening a tech studio in Germany, now has a truly international pool of talent to draw from. "We've evolved. We've adapted, and I think we're honestly better for it," he says. "It's always been our mantra that we're going to be the best-looking FPS on the market. People will make their own determinations, but I'm really happy with where we're at."

An appealingly discordant rush of metallic surfaces, gothic architecture and chunky weapons that is at once familiar and fresh, it certainly looks the part. And the whole lot thunders along at an unwavering 60fps in 1080p, exuding the kind of confident solidity that so many of its peers lack. Everything is rooted in the aesthetic of the first two games, but modernised with a self-deprecating reverence that's in keeping with the spirit of those pioneering originals. The Cacodemons

BELOW **The updated Cacodemons' pupil-less eyes are unnerving. They've gained stubby arms, too.** RIGHT **As is correct and proper, the campaign opens in a UAC facility**

LEFT **The Mancubus is heavily armoured and grotesque. Its flamethrower attack is wide reaching and very damaging.** FAR LEFT **The SnapMap editor's UI is unobtrusive and slick.** BELOW **Revenants are a greater threat than ever, leaping about and launching volleys of fast-moving rockets**

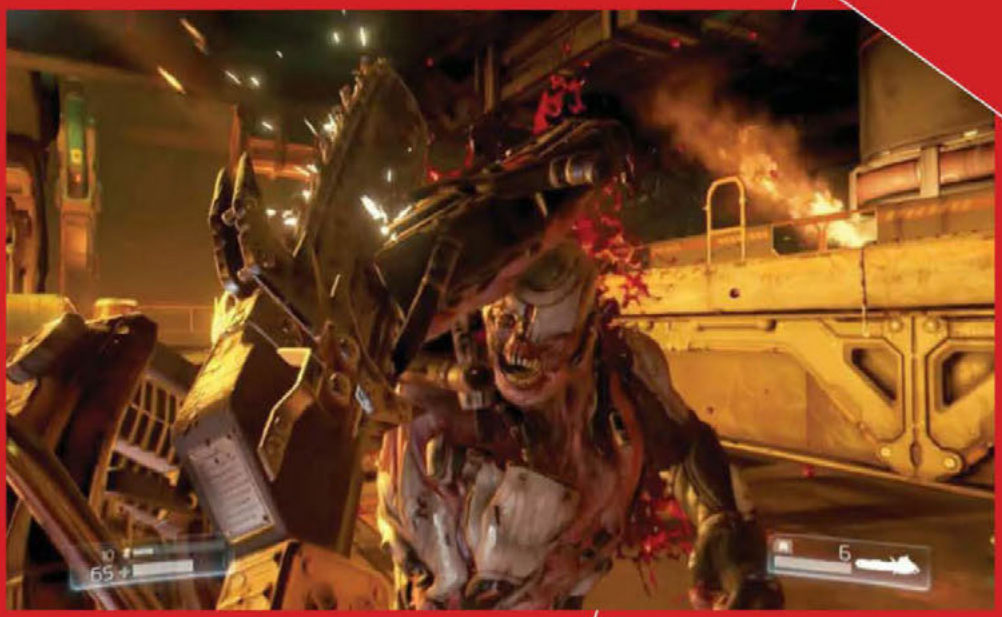
"IT'S ALWAYS BEEN OUR MANTRA THAT WE'RE GOING TO BE THE BEST-LOOKING FPS. I'M REALLY HAPPY WITH WHERE WE'RE AT"

## STROGG RESEMBLANCE

While *Doom* is inarguably of its series, the design happily borrows from *Quake*, too – not least during a section in Hell where we find a diagonal jump pad amid the ruins. "We can have you mantle up a ledge, but if it's a high space we want you to get out even quicker than that," Stratton explains. "So it's like, 'OK, does a jump pad make sense in Hell? [Laughs] Is it fun? Yes, it's fun, so let's *make* it make sense.' There are things we try not to tread too heavily on when mixing *Quake* and *Doom*, but we often just let the game tell us what it needs and then we'll fictionally justify it in one way or another."

## CUT ABOVE

The chainsaw makes a triumphant return but, along with the BFG, is counted as a special weapon and doesn't feature on the weapon wheel. It will dispatch enemies in one sickening cleave, and is even capable of instantly killing tougher enemies. As if that wasn't enough, for every kill it also rewards you with additional ammo for your other weapons (which all use the same projectiles). But all this power comes at a cost: the chainsaw now runs on fuel, and the tougher the enemy, the more fuel you'll use up in the process, clearly. When to break it out, and what to target, is another strategic decision to be made within the complex combat systems hidden beneath what can feel like chaos onscreen.



"WE WANTED IT TO BE AS FAST AND AS FUN AND AS FLUID AS IT COULD BE, SO WE JUST KEPT PUSHING THAT BAR UP HIGHER AND HIGHER"

TOP **The chainsaw is a useful but gruesome tool, its damage portrayed by a range of extravagant animations.** LEFT **Barons are faster and more manoeuvrable than they have any right to be, given their hulking, hooved mass**

ABOVE **SnapMap's extensive selection of objects, triggers and environmental effects are its nuts and bolts, but flexible scripting systems add crucial layers.** RIGHT **Portals can be destroyed, but your efforts won't be popular**

still look patently ridiculous, for example, but the biological plausibility born of the increase in detail and resolution makes their appearance all the more grotesque and their presence genuinely disquieting.

When we sit down with the game, another more striking difference in the enemies becomes apparent: they've gained a terrifying turn of speed. As a result, there's no time to stand still, much less attempt to strike up a conversation. Spidery Imps climb the walls to cut off our escape route as we back away from the outpouring of a Mancubus's flamethrower; Revenants bombard us with plumes of fast-moving rockets while an armoured pink Demon charges straight for our position; and now a pair of muscular Barons has entered the fray, one of them catching us off guard as it leaps a couple of storeys from ground level to reach the platform that will imminently serve as our final resting place. "If you stop moving," we're warned prior to tackling the section on Ultra Violence difficulty, "you're dead". We heed the advice, but expire anyway.

It's entirely our fault. We've been furnished with a double jump, the ability to mantle up surfaces, and the newly acrobatic Doomguy's no slouch when running either. We simply weren't prepared for the ferocity of our enemies' response in kind.

"You can't give the player all these traversal abilities, but not give the enemies more attack abilities to balance that out — it automatically ups the ante," explains a grinning **Hugo Martin**, Id Software's art director, as we reel from the onslaught. "We wanted it to be as fast and as fun and as fluid as it could be, so we just kept pushing that bar up higher and higher until we felt like it was as high as we could go. We didn't necessarily set out and say, 'This is how fast we want the game to be.' We just naturally let it land where it wanted to land."

The flowing combat is further supported by the game's elaborate Glory Kill system. Inflict enough damage on an enemy and you'll put them into a staggered state, in which they flash blue from a distance, and orange when you move into range. Click the right thumb stick or hit E and you'll perform a context-sensitive takedown that varies according to your angle of approach. You'll get extra ammo and some health for your effort, along with a quick, amusingly gruesome animation. It's not just a service to gorehounds: the setup also provides an effective way to manage the large numbers of fast-moving enemies, allowing for tough foes to be rapidly expunged from a fracas or temporarily taken out of the equation while staggered.

Married to the glory kills is another layer of depth in the form of player character configurations. We're only given a brief look at this aspect, since the studio isn't yet ready to show its entire hand, but the currency you earn from glory kills can be spent on alternative weapon firing modes and gameplay modifiers. If you prefer a safety net, for instance, you could boost the amount of ammo and health you receive from kills, and even have an opportunity to come back from the dead. More aggressive players can sate their bloodlust with faster glory kill animations and a resultant speed boost that propels you across the room towards your next targets.

**The alternative firing** modes, meanwhile, are mapped to the left trigger in place of ADS (although one weapon, the Lightning Gun, does allow you to scope with its alt mode), and each weapon can have two mods attached at any one time, alternated using up on the D-pad. The shotgun can fire a triple-burst shot for finishing off sticky opponents, while the plasma rifle is capable of stunning enemies. Then there's the formidable triple turret mode on the minigun (useful for taking down a lumbering Mancubus) and the rocket launcher's projectiles can be detonated prior to impact, allowing you to get creative with your splash damage.

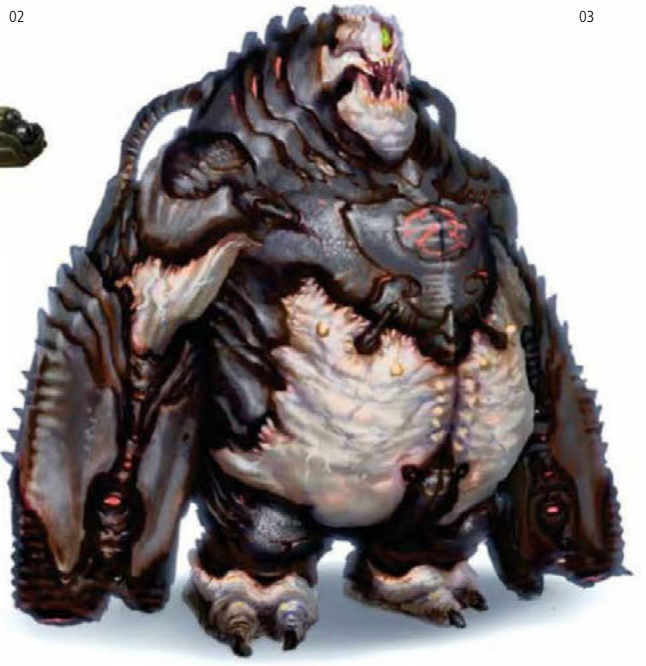
Although it sounds complex on paper, in practice all of this quickly hangs together intuitively, but that doesn't mean balancing it has been an easy task. "Every time we'd get together to talk about adding features to the game, it was tricky. I mean, everything is new," Martin explains. "That's why it was critical for us to set up filters — what we felt was the tone of our game. So whenever something new came in, of course we'd playtest it and evaluate it and all that usual stuff, but we also made sure that tone-wise it fitted our game. We want to make sure we're clear on the type of experience we're trying to make — a game that's all about push-forward combat. That combat is king in our game."

That same line of thinking has driven a masterful interweaving of enemies' complex, aggressive behaviours. The studio sees its bestiary of hellspawn as chess pieces, designed to influence players' decisions on the fly. "Each time we added a new enemy, we'd ask, 'Does it make you move? Does it make you think?' Martin explains. "We didn't want mindless bullet sponges — each character promotes a certain type of movement in the player. And they all work together — you can't have every guy be a pressure unit, because then all of a sudden you get pushed into a corner and start kiting guys, and all you're doing is running backwards and shooting."

Despite the bloody shower of new ideas and mechanics, then, Id's latest is a thunderous callback to the first two games. Faster and more aggressive, granted, and certainly smarter than before, but the lineage is clear. Id Software has left the creeping dread of *Doom* 3's winding dark corridors behind and focused once again on the joy of moving quickly through an environment while using a ridiculously oversized shotgun to splatter its surfaces with demon entrails. And for this reason, *Doom* feels like, well, *Doom*.

01

02



03

04

01 **UAC's unfortunate staff don't pose much threat in isolation, but they present an issue in busier rooms.**
02 **The art team has enjoyed reimagining *Doom*'s iconic enemies for the new game.**
03 **While fearsome, all of *Doom*'s enemy designs are shot through with a dash of lighthearted humour.**
04 **Making the Revenant playable risked diminishing its impact, but it's no less frightening as a result.**
05 **The Baron Of Hell's scaly, hardened skin makes it particularly robust.**
06 **The chunky Heavy Assault and Plasma Rifles are representative of the over-the-top aesthetic applied to *Doom*'s armoury**

06

05

## NEW HACK

Along with the weapons and additional items (which include creative devices such as grenades that sap health from the enemy and transfer it to you) you take into multiplayer matches, you also get to choose from a selection of time-limited Hack Modules. These modifiers can be switched between each time you die and allow you to change your play style on the go. You could start each life with additional armour, for instance, or use Supply Timer to gain the ability to see when a missing item will replenish itself. However, our favourite is Retribution, which displays the location and health of the last player to kill you.

"WE DIDN'T WANT MINDLESS BULLET SPONGES – EACH CHARACTER PROMOTES A CERTAIN TYPE OF MOVEMENT IN THE PLAYER"

TOP id thinks of its encounters as kinetic "combat puzzles" that must be solved, enemy behaviour ensuring that they always play out differently. ABOVE Environments in this modern *Doom* are built from evocative and imaginative takes on familiar locales

Hell Knights stick to the visual overhaul they had in *Doom 3*, ensuring they remain distinguishable from Barons Of Hell

That *Doom* wears its DNA well will come as a relief for anyone who cut their strafing teeth on E1M1, but it also means that the game stands out as something of an anomaly among the modern crop of online FPSes that contentedly trade on first-see, first-kill encounters and scope executions. It ensures the game feels markedly different to play in multiplayer — and jarringly so on first contact. When, a full five seconds after running headlong into an opposing player, you wonder why one of you isn't dead, it's tempting to conclude *Doom*'s guns aren't as beefy as their exaggerated dimensions suggest. But it's a deliberate design choice — Id wants every encounter to be meaningful and, moreover, escapable. Getting a kill (or avoiding becoming one) is about skill, weapon mastery and creative use of level geometry. It's the old way of doing things, but somehow feels uncharted when set against its contemporaries today.

"We just wanted it to stand out against whatever is going on in the current landscape of games," Martin explains. "Which is always changing, of course. I'm a *huge COD* fan, but we couldn't make another version of that type of game and just put a *Doom* label on it. Hopefully that's why people will want to play it, because it does feel different — it's familiar, but new."

**Along with standard** team deathmatch, we also try two other multiplayer modes: Warpath and Clan Arena. The first is a twist on King Of The Hill that lends new meaning to the term 'on-rails shooter'. A single objective zone moves along a path around the level, which each team must try to capture and hold for as long as possible; the team that possesses it for the longest at the end of the match is the victor. Moving around the same track, but always at the opposite point to the objective, is an intermittently functioning pentagram through which one player can summon, and take control of, either a Revenant or a Baron Of Hell. The players in control of this pickup (which also appears in deathmatch) are hard to kill and armed with devastating melee and ranged attacks, making for a terrifying shift in the balance of power should only one team have a demonic ally on side. Clan Arena, meanwhile, is a stripped-down version of team deathmatch in which there are no pickups and death is permanent. Both modes showcase *Doom*'s "push-forward" combat, but the latter adds a more circumspect cat-and-mouse endgame that ramps up the tension.

There will be more modes, of course, but you don't have to settle for Id's own designs. Like the editors built into *LittleBigPlanet* and *Trials Fusion*, Id's SnapMap allows ambitious players to go off-genre and conjure up their own minigames. We see a tower defence effort with a working item shop, a non-violent memory game that quizzes players on item arrangements in rooms that they've passed through, and a functioning giant musical keyboard inspired by the toy store scene in the movie Big. It's certainly not what we were expecting to see during a showcase for *Doom*.

But while SnapMap's potential for complexity is evident, its greater achievement is in the rapidity with which it brings players up to speed. Inspired by the uncluttered and welcoming nature of GarageBand, Id worked with Dallas-based Escalation Studios to build a tool that strips away what it sees as the "cumbersome nature of modding". The on-ramp for this ambitious task is a series of short tutorials that teach you the basics quickly. And they work: within 15 minutes of sitting down with the editor for the first time, we had our first functioning level up and running. It is far from refined, and we lean on the enemy and item-spawning modules that automatically populate levels for you, but the truth is that SnapMap mitigates a case of crippling blank-canvas syndrome faster than perhaps any other in-game editor we've used to date.

But this accessibility comes at a small cost: you're restricted to using prefab parts and can't simply sketch out your own shapes. It's a concession that to some extent curtails the tool's potential for player creativity — a problem when it comes to courting players who've already spent decades creating WADs for the original games and their various user-modded versions. But Stratton sees more benefits than drawbacks.

"I do agree that for some who've hand-built levels in the past, it could initially feel like a limitation," he says. "But there are tremendous benefits that I think that group will come to appreciate. It's incredibly fast and easy to get a playable space that looks good, and there are a lot of modules to use. We provide a number of ways for creators to customise the space through props, lighting, effects and so on, and make it look or play uniquely. And we've eliminated a lot of the time-consuming or technically limiting factors of traditional map creation — and since there are no time-consuming uploads or downloads of maps it's nearly instantaneous to play what you've created, publish it to the SnapMap content hub, or invite a friend to play with you."

It's as clear an example as any of the balancing act Id is faced with as it looks to appease *Doom* veterans while also re-establishing the series for a new generation. Despite a jittery start to production, it seems the studio has finally remembered its old trick: making its games' components hang in perfect equilibrium in a way that resembles magic. It's a titanic effort for which everyone, not least Miss Donna, can be extremely proud.

"It's very different to a lot of other shooters, but it's true to what we as a team feel we should make and what we're good at," Stratton says. "It's true to *Doom* and it has a place. People have been playing the likes of *COD* and *Battlefield* for a long time, and those games have grown in popularity — I hope this is our tip of the iceberg as to what *Doom* can become. I think people will enjoy it and hopefully end up playing this version, and many versions in the future, for a really long time." ■

# Q&A: TOM MUSTAINE

## GAME DESIGNER AND ESCALATION STUDIOS CO-FOUNDER

Game designer and Escalation Studios co-founder **Tom Mustaine** talks us through working closely with Id to create SnapMap (below), and how building levels for the original *Doom* kicked off his career.

**How did you get started making levels for *Doom*?**
The first time I played *Doom* on my dad's 486, I took a left in E1M1 and saw those stairs ascending up to the green armour room with those huge picture windows looking out to what felt like an infinite sky. I knew then I'd do anything to find out how to make levels for *Doom*. I spent months digging up every possible tool and resource to build content for the game, and from there it was a rollercoaster of making hundreds of levels and mods, including some that made it into *Master Levels*, *Final Doom*, and more.

**What does it mean to you to be working so closely with Id on a series so close to your heart?**
This is a dream come true. *Doom* ultimately became a gateway for infinite content and as a side effect provided a path into professional game development for myself and many others like me. Being able to take an idea, build it into a downloadable package, and share it with the world is something that the original *Doom* essentially pioneered. With SnapMap, we're pushing to take that experience up another level by having infinite content available to players, along with the capability to create, remix, and share with ease.

**Do you still dabble in WAD-making these days?**
I do! I play a fair amount of *ZDaemon*, which is basically classic *Doom* and *Doom II* with modern networking and tons of custom levels. I frequently check out the latest *Doom* WADs, WAD editors and source ports, many of which have mind-blowing features these days. The *Doom* community is certainly still going strong!

Along with the many levels he's constructed for versions of *Doom* over the years, Escalation Studios co-founder Tom Mustaine composed music for his creations

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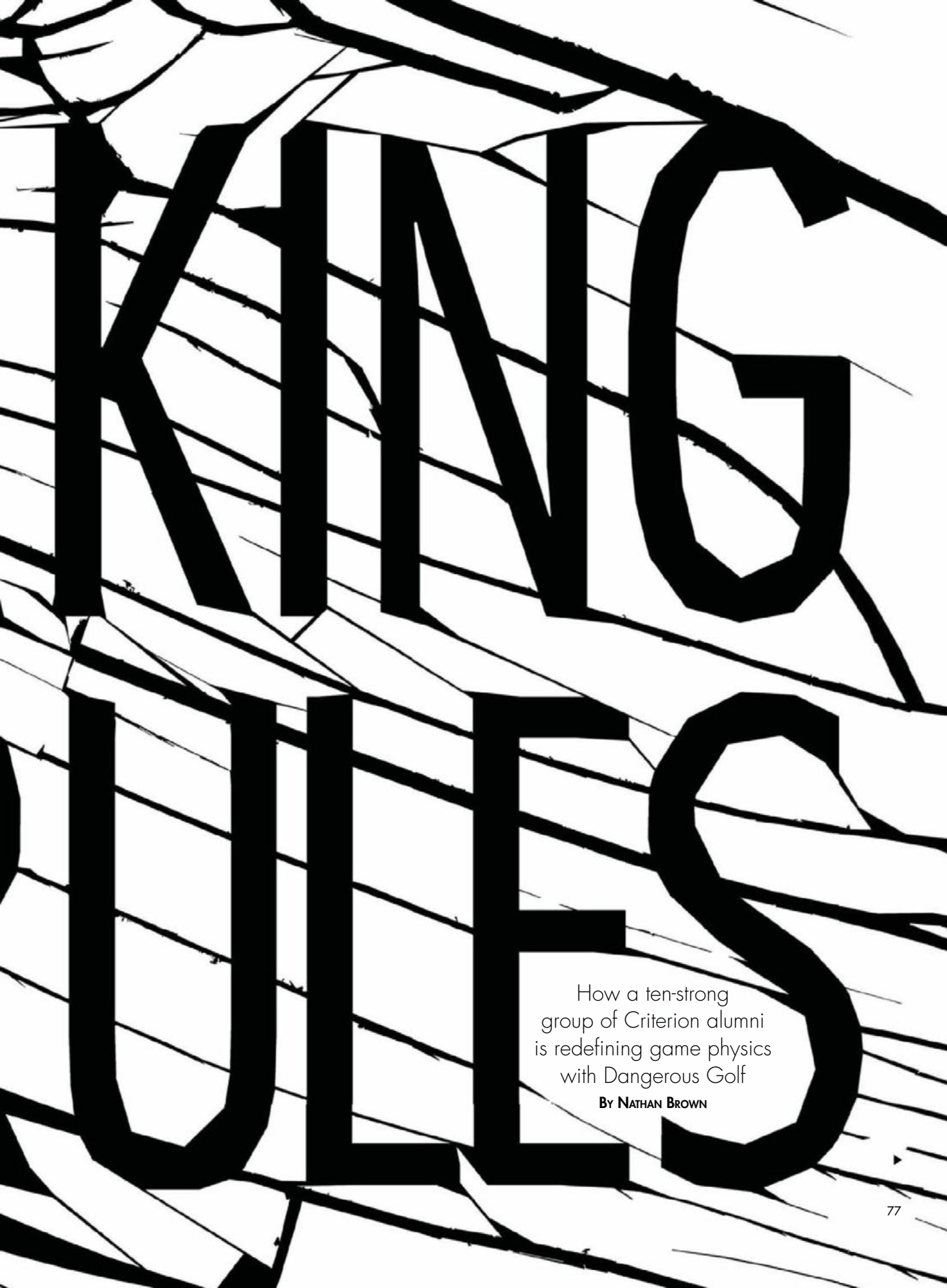



How a ten-strong group of Criterion alumni is redefining game physics with Dangerous Golf

**By Nathan Brown**

We see a lot of mood boards in this line of work. In the offices of every game developer in the world you'll find at least one of them; perhaps a little rectangle made of cork, or a whiteboard that covers an entire wall. Plastered all over them are screenshots, film stills, concept art and famous paintings that, together, sum up the tone and style of a game in production. But while we've seen hundreds of them, we've never seen one quite like the one we're shown when we visit Three Fields Entertainment.

There's a golfer playing a shot out of the branches of a tree. Then a couple of stills from the Kevin Costner flick Tin Cup, where our hero plays a shot out of a building and off a Portaloo ("He's gonna hit it right off the shitter!"). We get it: Three Fields is making a golf game. But what's this? The world-bending Paris scene from Inception? Keanu Reeves in The Matrix? Ian McKellen as Magneto? 2001: A Space Odyssey? And, hang on a minute, isn't that a still from the video for Dancing On The Ceiling, in which Lionel Richie walks straight up the walls, then up above, where he boogies upside-down like some kind of Soul Glo chandelier? What on Earth is going on here?

"I'm saying to the guys, look, golf is boring," Three Fields' co-founder, creative director and mood-board maker **Alex Ward** tells us. "Golfers are boring. Golf games made for golfers are boring. Golf is only exciting when they play out of a tree; when Hollywood makes a film about

ABOVE **The game employs dynamic lighting: knock down a chandelier, and the room goes dark. During the Smashbreaker the ball itself is a light source.**
LEFT ***Dangerous Golf*** **isn't just a game of destruction, but also of looking at the aftermath. Its remarkable physics ensure everything piles up properly**

**Game** *Dangerous Golf*
**Developer/publisher** Three Fields Entertainment
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
**Release** April

**The Three Fields team, minus one absentee, poses at the entrance to a rec ground near the office. Almost all of those present list Criterion on their CV**

golf, they play it indoors and do a trick shot off a toilet.

"You want to put a lot of stuff on the screen. You want to play with the camera, like in The Matrix. You want to be able to manipulate the environment like Magneto." And Lionel Richie? "Imagine a golf game where the hole is halfway up the wall. It's not about precision; no clubs, no swing meter. We wanted to make up the rules."

And so they have. This is the endearingly bonkers train of thought behind the endearingly bonkers *Dangerous Golf*. It's the debut game from Three Fields Entertainment, a ten-person studio set up two years ago in Hampshire by Ward and his fellow Criterion alumni **Fiona Sperry** and **Paul Ross**. Ward was creative director at Criterion, Sperry the head of studio, and Ross the technical director. After more than a decade making driving games – first redefining the arcade-influenced racer with *Burnout*, then rescuing the creatively moribund *Need For Speed* series with the pioneering *Hot Pursuit* and, later, *Most Wanted* – the three began to think about calling it quits. Each had their own reasons – Ross, for instance, recalls being asked to sign off on a new appraisal system for the engineering department and wondering where it had all gone wrong. Ward and Sperry went first, in late 2013, while Ross followed shortly after. Together the three pooled their life savings and set up on their own.

"It was quite scary," Ward admits. "We all left good jobs – secure jobs. It would've been easy to stay. We'd done a lot of games and been pretty successful at it; we were good at shipping games, but it was ultimately unsatisfying [to think of] doing another one. We'd stopped learning. We'd been talking about it for a long time, but we finally decided to leave and give it a go. You've got to find out: can you do it?"

Other Criterion alumni have followed. **Chris Roberts**, the designer who left after shipping *Burnout Revenge* and was working at Dovetail when Ward came calling, soon signed up. So did Phil Maguire, who coded *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*'s influential social system Autolog, and Simon Phipps, a senior designer on *NFS Most Wanted*. Paul Phillpot was lead vehicle artist on Criterion's *Need For Speed* games. Others have joined from elsewhere – artist Fung Sia came from Ubisoft Shanghai – but the spirit of Criterion is deep in Three Fields' DNA.

> "GOLFERS ARE BORING. GOLF GAMES MADE FOR GOLFERS ARE BORING. GOLF IS ONLY EXCITING WHEN THEY PLAY OUT OF A TREE"

**It's in the** DNA of *Dangerous Golf*, too, which, despite the name, and the series of thematic non-sequiturs on its mood board, is closer to Criterion's wheelhouse than you might think. Simply put, it's *Burnout*'s Crash mode with a golf ball. Crash was set out on the street, at a series of junctions;

*Dangerous Golf* is set indoors, in a palace, a petrol station, a professional kitchen – tight interiors full of smashable things.

In Crash, your first order of business was to wreck a certain number of vehicles, to earn a powerup called a Crashbreaker; here, you have to smash a minimum number of objects – statues in the palace, plates in the kitchen and so on – to earn a Smashbreaker. Where *Burnout*'s beloved side-mode let you explode your car back up in the air and cause more damage with aftertouch, here your ball is flung back up into the air, set on fire and controllable – but not *too* controllable – with the analogue sticks. A timer bar shows how long you have to cause as much carnage as possible. When it's empty, gravity takes over, and the ball comes to rest. Then comes the putt: you have one shot to get the ball in the hole, and will lose half your score – calculated, like Crash mode, in dollars' worth of damage caused – if you miss.

"That's when you can do a trick shot," Three Fields' 'game maker' (staff can choose their own job titles) Chris Roberts says. "Tiger Woods, if the ball was right next to the hole, wouldn't turn his back to it and try to ricochet it in off a tree. We want people to do that, and will reward them for it, but there's risk attached. If we were playing [competitively] and I didn't do quite as much damage as you in the Smashbreaker section, I'd want to make up for that, and I could do it with an incredibly tricky putt. Or I could land my ball miles away from the hole – on top of a microwave, or up in the eaves – and try to hit the ball in."

That's it in a nutshell, though there are twists. Each level has a set of optional targets – in the kitchen, for instance, there's a bonus to be

**Three Fields creative director Alex Ward**

**The castle stage is still in production when we visit, artists busily filling the area with stuff to smash**

"WE LOVE HIGH SCORES, WE LOVE PLAYING TOGETHER, WE LIKE BEATING PEOPLE. YOU'VE GOT TO BE WHO YOU ARE"

**The team cites *Splatoon* as a driving influence on a level based on making a mess with cans of paint**

had for destroying all the burgers dotted about the place, and a further score boost for smashing a bottle of secret sauce. Other stages forbid you from touching the floor, or have you use a mop bucket as a makeshift vehicle. Multiplayer is either competitive or co-operative, the latter seeing you share the same playing field, the second player tasked with mopping up what remains after their companion's flaming golf ball has done its work. It's snappy, satisfying, deliciously silly stuff. It's all very *Burnout*.

"We have to be true to ourselves," Ward says, gesturing towards the *Bomb Jack* cabinet that greets you when you walk in the front door, the framed '80s album covers on the wall and, between them, cabinets full of old Criterion awards. "If you look around the office it's clear we like arcade games, and we like the '80s. I think there's an arcade influence in everything I've worked on. We love high scores, we love playing together, we like beating people. You've got to be who you are. We weren't going to go off and make an RPG."

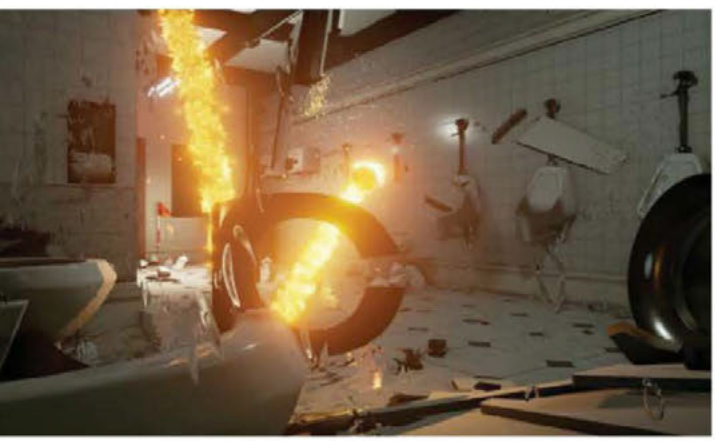
**Given the stylistic** similarities with *Burnout*'s Crash mode, you probably think you can picture *Dangerous Golf* in action. Sorry, but you can't. Underpinning the game is an outrageous physics system that has caused this ten-person studio, tinkering

## BUMP AND FLEX

**A few years ago, Phil Maguire (above) was earning plaudits for coding Autolog, the realtime leaderboard system in *NFS: Hot Pursuit* that's been widely imitated since. When we visit, he's coding a suspension system for a mop bucket but, if anything, the work he's doing now will prove more influential than Autolog.**

**Maguire's work is achingly modern, but also dates back to the 1970s, when NASA engineers were breaking ground in smooth particle hydrodynamics – using particles to simulate the behaviour of fluids. "It was used to extrapolate values across the solar system," he tells us. "You take a point in one place and work out what that value would be somewhere else. The real challenge with trying to do liquids in software is you can't simulate everything to the level of the atom." Drawing on research from Unreal Partner developer Mike Skolones and Flex creator Miles Macklin, Maguire worked out how modern GPUs could simulate the behaviour of liquids by converting a body of fluid into thousands of small spheres.**

**"What these smart guys have been doing is simulating it using particles, which [today's] systems are really good at," Maguire explains. "And you can work out what the quantity of the liquid fluid simulation is at each of these different particles. All of a sudden you've got something you've never seen before in a game: a fluid simulation." For now, it's defining the splatters of ketchup, mustard and paint caused by a flaming golf ball. Its potential influence on the videogame industry at large, however, is enormous.**



True Lies inspired this stage. It, and many other sources of inspiration, are stored on a studio server

away at the end of a dirt track in a small Hampshire town, to turn heads halfway across the world. One platform holder thought Ward was joking when he told them how many physics objects Three Fields was flinging about on its console. It was more than 30 times as much as a recent triple-A game, renowned for its physics, could handle.

Back to the kitchen. You tee off into a crate of eggs, and the whole lot goes up in shards of shell and yolk. You hit the Smashbreaker target with ease and burst back up into the air, steering your fiery projectile into a shelf of champagne flutes that shatter and shower to the floor. Next are the plates, which break into satisfying chunks of china. At some point you take out the ketchup and mustard containers, and the camera splatters red and yellow, briefly obscuring your vision. The Smashbreaker bar empties and your ball falls to Earth. Time for the putt. You turn your back on the flag and knock the ball off a wall; it hits a fridge door and finally drops into the hole. A *Burnout*-style flyby shows you the aftermath, every fragment and splatter sitting exactly where the laws of physics say it should be. It's remarkable.

Clearly this is a studio with big ideas. Long before a ball had been struck, or Ward had even begun to assemble the mood board of madness, Three Fields had decided to bet big on technology.

"The last [console] transition, we were so busy making games that it just kind of crept up on us," Paul Ross, the former Criterion technical director who these days has the job title 'imagineer' on his business cards, tells us. "When we first started I remember sitting here thinking, OK, what does a PlayStation 5 game look like?

"IT'S ABOUT SIMULATING PHYSICS AT A MOLECULAR LEVEL. IT'S BEEN A REALLY HARD PROBLEM TO SOLVE FOR A WHILE"

While *Burnout*'s Crash mode aftertouch was controlled with just the left stick, here the right stick is used to rotate the camera

A co-op partner would struggle to mop up after this mess. Little wonder that Three Fields suggests beginner players go first

The Smashbreaker never quite makes you feel in full control of its power

What does an Xbox Two game look like? And how can we start to build for that future right now?"

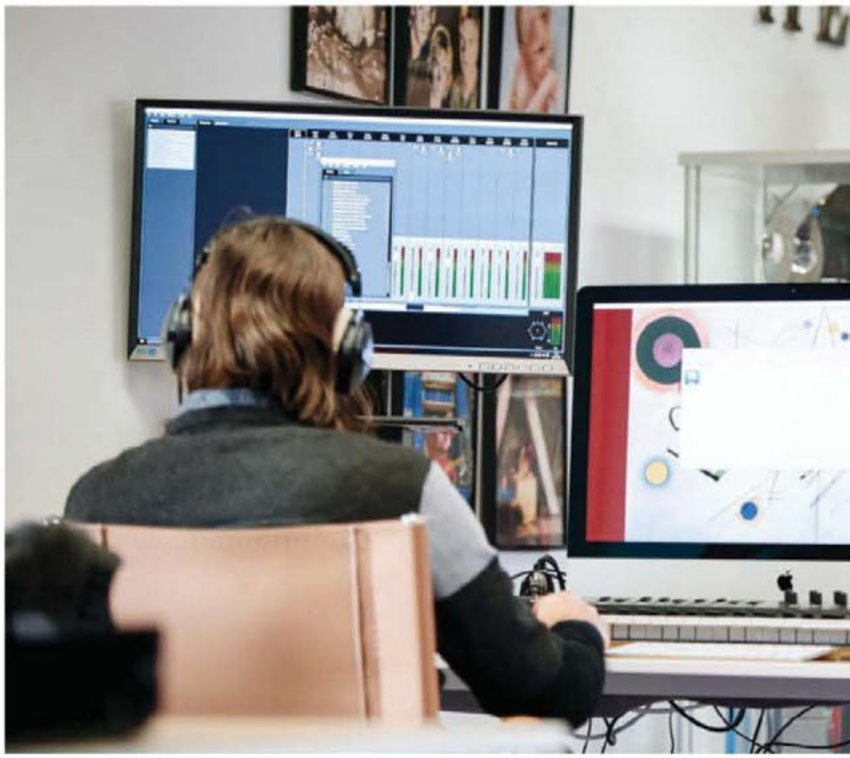
The answer, as the mess on the TV screen makes abundantly clear, is physics. We're shown a tech demo of two Nvidia technologies: the physics middleware PhysX, which is increasingly common in games, and Flex, a newer technique based on NASA tech, which uses particle simulations to mimic the properties of real-world objects such as fabric and, crucially for a game where you want to splatter the screen with ketchup and mustard, fluids.

"Physics engines haven't changed since I did the physics on [Criterion's 1999 Dreamcast game] *TrickStyle*," Ross says. "They're all about rigid bodies, solid objects. This is a real paradigm shift because it's about simulating physics at a molecular level. It's been a really hard problem to solve for quite a while. So what does a PS5 game look like? With PS4 we've seen some fidelity put into the worlds, but PS5's going to be about far more dynamic worlds, far more interactive worlds that are more believable in the way they behave."

So it proves. Every breakable object in the game has accurate, real-world properties, with Ross and the team searching online for the correct density value of glass, china, porcelain and so on – the latter powering a level set in a public toilet, inspired by the bathroom fight in mid-'90s Schwarzenegger flick True Lies – and plugging them into Unreal Engine 4. "You're seeing thousands and thousands of rigid bodies, all being simulated in real time," Ross says. "Epic and Nvidia have been working with us all the way through to tune and tweak. They're loving it, because we're pushing their physics engines and tech further than anyone's ever done before."

Building for the future is all well and good, of course, but how do you ensure a game designed with the presumably far-off next generation in mind runs effectively on the current one? Well, you cheat a bit. The Flex fluid simulations (see 'Bump and flex', p81) are captured on a powerful PC running two Nvidia Titan GPUs, logged and played back as required on consoles. During the Smashbreaker section, when destruction levels are at their peak, the accuracy of the PhysX simulation is lowered so that modern console GPUs can cope with a scene that the naked eye is incapable of fully parsing anyway. "Then as everything comes to rest we put the super-expensive physics back on again so it all piles nicely," Ross says. "A lot of people, when they use the [Unreal] destruction tool, they just have it break, and it falls away from the landscape, and that's it. One of the easiest things to do is just cycle it out: you smash it up, you get rid of some bits. That would've been really lame. I wanted you to be able to see all the destruction you've caused." Ross has named the technology, brilliantly, Mess Simulator.

Designer Chris Roberts joined from *Train Simulator* maker Dovetail Games



## PRICED OUT

**Fiona Sperry (above) joined Criterion in 1997, when the studio was building its console debut, the Dreamcast hoverboard racer *TrickStyle*. After launch, she became head of studio, appointing Alex Ward as creative director and restyling Criterion, which had spent its early years building tech demos for Intel, as a committed maker of console games. Little wonder, then, that after setting up Three Fields Sperry and team opted against joining the industry-wide rush to mobile.**

**They tried, in fact, and had a prototype of *Dangerous Golf* up and running on iPad pretty quickly. But hardware limitations, and business considerations, put them off. "It's a very different audience, price point, business model," Sperry says. "It's very challenging. And it just wasn't as much fun as making a console game."**

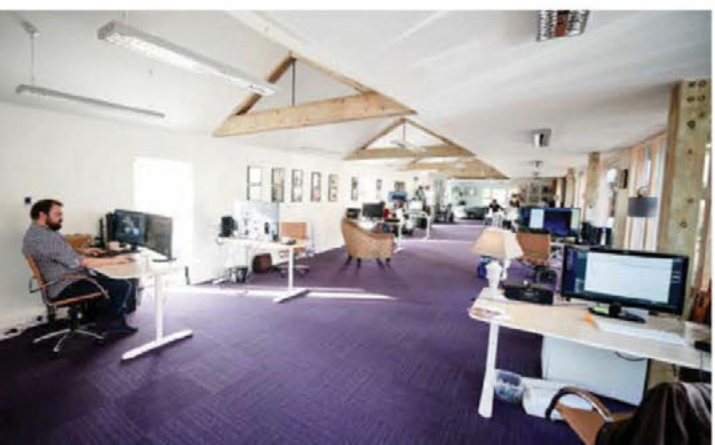
**As former head of studio at Criterion, Sperry appreciates the freedom Three Fields offers more than most. In 2004 she became general manager of EA's entire UK studio operation – some 400 staff – and is clearly relishing being freed of all that corporate red tape, even though Criterion had a better time of it than others.**

**"We actually had a lot of independence at EA," she tells us, "as long as we made good games to the dates they wanted. But we know ourselves too well. We like to do a good job, so if there's someone else paying us we'll change our plans to fit what they need, rather than just do what we want to. It was largely about being independent; about freedom, which was a word we used an awful lot in our first year."**

**That desire for liberty led to Three Fields' founding group deciding to run the studio with their life savings, rather than seek external funding. "It's a very British thing to do. Californians think we're crazy: 'You're doing it with your *own* money? Why on Earth would you do that?'" The studio's Britishness is reflected, too, in *Dangerous Golf*'s price point. In a riposte to years of US publishers ignoring exchange rates and swapping pound signs for dollar symbols, *Dangerous Golf*'s base price will be £12.99 in the UK, with the cost in foreign markets properly calculated from there.**

ABOVE ***Dangerous Golf*'s 7.1 audio mix is a particular point of pride for the team.** LEFT **Ward runs us through the weirdest mood board in game industry history**

BELOW **This is Three Fields' second office. Sperry relished the ease of upping sticks, with no need for publisher signoff**



Destruction is wanton, but there's room for precision. How about methodically clearing out a wall of shelves laden with pots?

Three Fields didn't choose Unreal straight away, but first put every engine technology on the market through its paces. Away from its obvious benefits for the physics simulations, UE4's Blueprinting system, which turns coding into a visual language that can be read, understood and edited by devs of all disciplines, is a key factor in how this tiny studio is able to aim so high.

"When we were making a car game [at Criterion], I'd be reviewing cars with Paul [Phillpot] and say, 'Why don't the headlights look better?' And he'd say, 'Well, we need a shader,'" Ward explains. "He'd go and see the programmer on the graphics team, and they're a big team with a lot of stuff to do, so [our request] gets added to a long list of other stuff. And the reality is it doesn't actually ever get done. Now he can just do it himself.

Paul Ross was Criterion's longest-serving employee

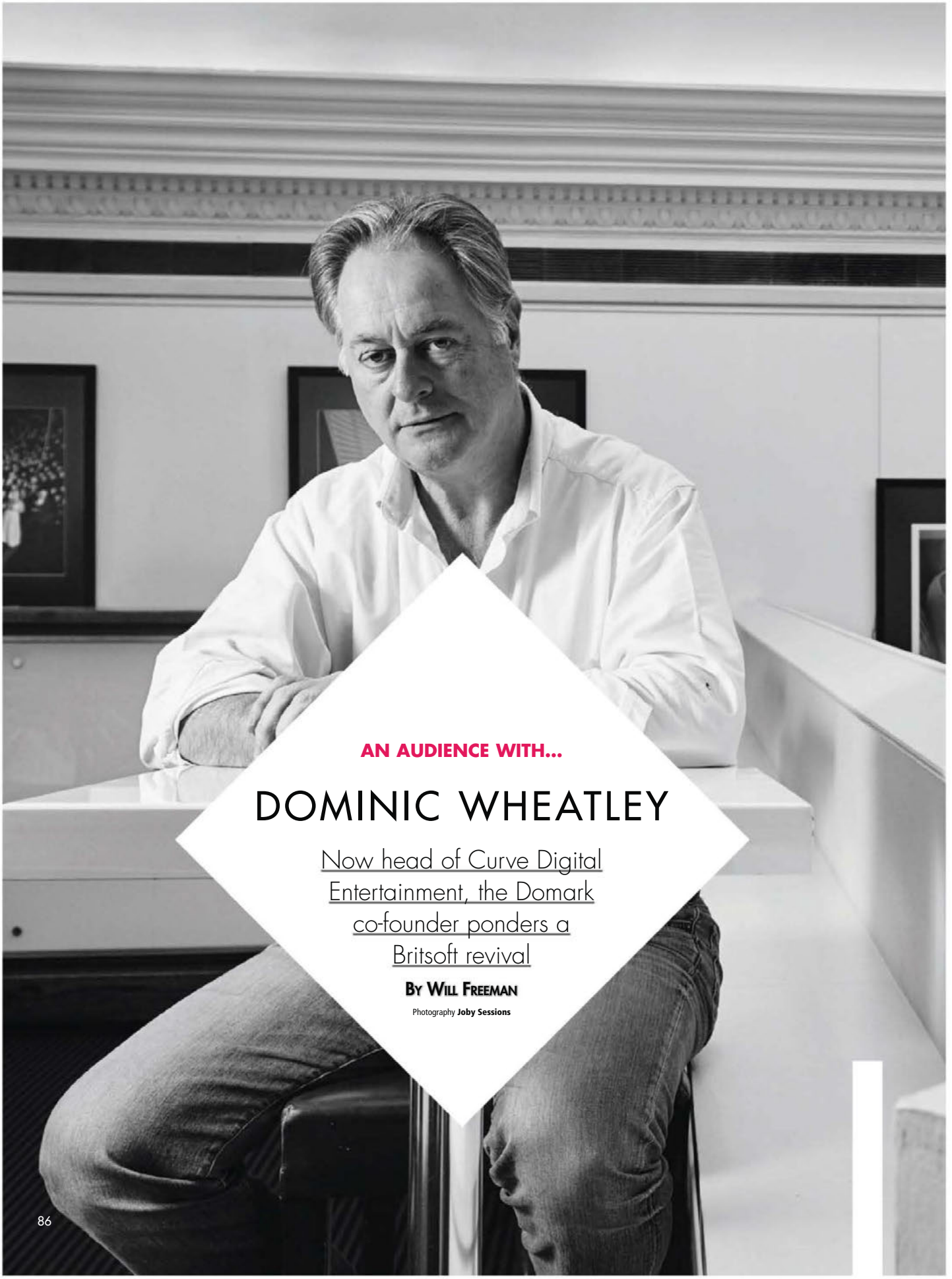
## "IT FEELS LIKE WE'RE PULLING OFF THE WORKLOAD OF OUR PREVIOUS GAMES, DOING THE WORK OF 40, 50 PEOPLE"

The cover of Van Halen's 1984 hangs on the wall. An early prototype used Jump for background music

"It's almost like one against many. We've got to be smart about what we're doing, how we're doing it, the approach we've taken. It feels like we're pulling off the workload of anything we've done before, doing the work of 40, 50 people. Paul said at the start of the project, working with Epic, with Nvidia – it's like having a 400-person team behind you."

It's just as well, really, since Three Fields isn't exactly following the traditional roadmap for when triple-A developers go indie. Few people would've batted an eyelid had this group of developers grown tired of working for years on big-budget projects, set up on their own and knocked out a mobile game in six months. Instead they've spent two years making a decidedly ambitious console title. No one would have been surprised if they had leveraged their considerable pedigree, fluttered their eyelashes at Silicon Valley and hoovered up a couple of rounds of venture capital funding, or simply turned to Kickstarter. Instead they've spent two years living off their dwindling life savings. This tiny team is doing things its own way, building something remarkable for the future, and using it to make something remarkably silly for today.

That's rather put in context when artist Paul Phillpot is explaining how he can simply go to a website, download the correct real-world properties of a particular brand of lightbulb and feed it into UE4 to ensure that *Dangerous Golf*'s dynamic lighting is as accurate as possible. It shows the perils of working on such a big idea in so small a team, but also shows entirely why Three Fields is doing it. "This is the downside to not having a big team," Ward says. "[At a massive studio] you don't have time to fall down a deep hole of rendering, of rigid body physics, NASA technology and what fluorescence lightbulbs should be. When there's only ten of us, there's no one to stop us." ■



**AN AUDIENCE WITH...**

# DOMINIC WHEATLEY

Now head of Curve Digital Entertainment, the Domark co-founder ponders a Britsoft revival

**By Will Freeman**

Photography **Joby Sessions**

**Dominic Wheatley** set up UK videogame publisher Domark in the early '80s with business partner Mark Strachan, inspired entirely by an encounter with a Commodore 64 and the arrival of adventure games. Taking the fledgling company's brand from a portmanteau of their names, the pair quickly secured Games Workshop legend Ian Livingstone to write their first title, *Eureka*.

From there Domark grew quickly, publishing one of James Bond's first interactive adventures, before eventually merging with Eidos via a reverse takeover, establishing one of the UK's most important publishing houses. Having guided Eidos through the debut of *Tomb Raider* and beyond, Wheatley eventually took a back seat, focusing on other business. Until now, that is. Stepping up as the head of Curve Digital Entertainment – itself formed from the recent merger of Kuju and Curve – Wheatley has returned to the helm, and has high hopes that British publishing can regain ground.

**Looking back to the beginning, when you set up Domark, you came into games with no experience of the industry at all. What motivated that move?**
I was working in a small advertising agency in Covent Garden [in London] in 1982 until 1984. And then the Christmas in 1984 I went home, and my brother had bought a Commodore 64, and I saw him playing some games on it, and I thought it was absolutely fascinating. I already knew about *Space Invaders* on the Atari VCS and those sorts of platforms, but when I saw him playing an adventure game where he would type 'kill the dwarf' and it would say, 'You killed the dwarf, and now the door is open,' I thought that was just unbelievable. It was a very simple parser engine, but I had never seen anything like it. I'd thought computers were just for accounts departments. Suddenly games were using a keyboard instead of just sticks. There was typing and communicating, and I thought to myself that this would be huge.

Working in an ad agency, I was interested in finding potential clients that we could advertise for, so I thought I had to find one of the guys doing this, be it Sinclair or Commodore, and make them a client. I went back to work at the agency in the new year, and I went upstairs to see my account director – a guy named Terry Bubear of Clark-Bubear-Hill – and I was formulating my idea as I walked up those stairs. And then literally as I opened the door I thought, 'Hang on, why don't I get involved in this games business?' I realised I could create a games company that would make or publish the games that play on these computers.

As I swung the door open Terry looked up from his desk. I looked at him and said, "Hang on, Terry – I'll come back." I walked back down those stairs knowing I needed to do this myself. Basically, I decided then to start a videogame company. So I went through the usual process of trying to raise some money and getting it up and running, and that was Domark.

**With no game-making experience, how did you approach your first release?**
We started out with a game called *Eureka*, and the idea was that it was an adventure game, so we got Ian Livingstone to come and do the scripts. He was part of Games Workshop at that point, and writing Fighting Fantasy books. We went off to a guy called Robert Stein who had some developers in Hungary, believe it or not, and they were commissioned to program the game. This was very, very early days and quite rudimentary. We used our marketing and advertising skills to get a lot of publicity. We did PR, various promotions and advertising, and got interest in the thing, offering a prize [£25,000] to the first person to solve the game. Remember, this was when the game industry was really a mail-order business.

**When a good amount of computer games were being sold via black-and-white ads in hobbyist magazines.**
Absolutely. So we predicated our business plan on the idea that it was going to be a mail-order business, because that's how it was. But as we were waiting for the game to be created – which took about eight months – things changed. By the time we were towards launch, the big retailers like WHSmith and in those days – believe it or not – Boots had started selling games, always on cassettes, and for Spectrum and Commodore. Then small mom-and-pop stores and local dealers stated selling them too, bundled with computers. Suddenly we had a retail opportunity, and though we did sell a few thousand through mail order, mostly we were selling into shops.

That came out and it was half successful. It actually did quite well, considering. But it did what we didn't think it would do. It didn't do great and it didn't do terribly either. We thought we would fail, or win big.

**It gave you the opportunity to press on, though.**
It did. We didn't make our fortune and retire, but nor did we go out of business. We were still there, with money in the bank, so we thought, 'What are we going to do next?' My grandfather was an author and the same people who looked after my grandfather's rights looked after [James Bond author] Ian Fleming's rights. So I was having ▶

***Eureka*, penned by Ian Livingstone, was the first game to carry the Domark label. A prize of £25,000 was on offer to the first person to finish the adventure**

**Years before Rare had a crack at Bond, Domark produced a series of titles based on Ian Fleming's character, including 1987's *The Living Daylights***

## CV

With a background in the army and advertising, Dominic Wheatley founded publisher Domark with no knowledge of the game industry in 1985. By the 1990s the company had merged with Eidos, standing as a robust champion of the Britsoft movement, at a time when UK publishers carried international clout. After time away from direct involvement in games, Wheatley returned four years ago to serve as CEO of Catalis, the owner of Kuju Entertainment as well as QA and localisation firm Testronic. He recently guided Kuju through a merger with developer-publisher Curve Digital.

lunch with them and we were talking about this crazy new world of videogames. And then the 'agent', if you like, for James Bond stuff said, "Why don't you do a James Bond game?" This was back in probably late 1985.

**And it was *Eureka*'s modest success that enabled you to cover the cost of the rights for that first Domark Bond game, *A View To A Kill*?**
Absolutely. That was it. And it built and built.

**You seem to have approached all of this in your stride back then, and talk about it as if investing came as second nature. Were you a natural entrepreneur?**
I think I believe we're all entrepreneurial to a greater or lesser extent, and I suppose back then I did feel entrepreneurial. I felt like games were a good opportunity and a good idea for us. I knew even as a kid growing up I would do something on my own. I wasn't terribly biddable. I was OK with institutions, as I was an army officer for three years, from 19 to 22, or that sort of period. That took me to the jungles of Belize and so on. So I could, as it were, work for people, but I didn't really feel comfortable in that and knew I wanted to do my own thing. I don't suppose I thought I would do it all so soon.

**And after getting to the point of Domark selling £11 million in games a year, you managed a reverse takeover of Eidos in 1995. Was that part of a well-considered plan?**
We always had our eye on a main goal, and people do say, 'Be careful what you wish for, lest you should receive it.' There can be consequences to having big plans, but I always thought we would make it big and we would be a big company, and our investors would make a good return. That was always in my mind, but how would we get there? I saw it as a course that would come to us.

And we had ups and downs over the ten years building up to the Eidos deal. But one way or the other, we got there. It wasn't exactly an executed plan, it was more of a general assumption that as long as we did OK, it would work out.

**What about your connection with games as a medium? You saw their business potential, but was that paired with any affection for what games are?**
We were playing games before my brother bought that Commodore 64. We were playing Intellivison games, and things like *Pong* and *Space Invaders*, of course. We enjoyed those interactive games – *Scramble*, too – and there were loads we used to play. So I was familiar with games when I saw that arrival of the keyboard in games, and the fact you could have adventure games as well as those *Space Invader*-type games. That whole new dimension to what interactive entertainment was about really excited me.

## "I THINK PEOPLE WERE SURPRISED BY HOW BIG GAMES BECAME, AND BY HOW BIG OUR COMPANY BECAME"

Am I a brilliant game designer? No. Do I like and appreciate interactive entertainment? Yes. Do I play *Call Of Duty* every night? No. It's a bit like working in a chocolate factory. You don't eat as much chocolate when you're involved in making it. In games that's different on the production side of things, but if you're on the business and marketing and sales side of things, you tend to be looking at the market differently, and focusing there, rather than playing too much.

**But that business opportunity is connected to what games offer creatively and as a medium?**
Absolutely, and that's why I thought they could become an enormous industry. There were people who said at the time to me, at the point I was going around asking for money because I had none, "Oh, it will be like the skateboard. It will be over by Christmas." There were people who thought games wouldn't last; that they were a toy – some bouncing ball to be taken over by another bouncing ball. But I felt differently. I felt games were a medium, like print or television. Games were like film and music, and I was sure they would become big. If I'd said they would become bigger than movies by 2015, they probably would've laughed me out of the room, but that's obviously what's happened. I think people were surprised by how big games became, and by how big our company became. That was all very satisfying.

**You mentioned being captivated by the transition from early consoles to home computer systems for videogames, but during your time with Eidos there was a transition back to consoles. What kind of challenge did that bring?**
That move was a double-edged sword. When Nintendo and Sega came in later in the '80s and the early '90s with these machines that worked all the time – that could be thrown into a wall and they'd bounce off it and still work – that was interesting for us. They had cartridges that were absolutely perfect and loaded instantly, and they'd been tried, tested and QA'ed to within an inch of their lives, so you knew they were quality and weren't going to have bugs. That brought order to what was a very, very disparate market. Before

that there were a lot of companies putting bad games – featuring a lot of bugs – into fancy packaging. If Christmas was close, they would just launch without QA. Consumers were, to some extent, going off computer games a little bit in that period.

**How about the other side of the sword?**

The other side of that double-edged sword was you suddenly had to be a reasonably sized business to be able to play. You had to get a licence from Nintendo or Sega – and you couldn't do both in those days. You had to pick your console, and we picked Sega at first. Then you were only allowed to do three or four games a year. You couldn't just do ten. And you couldn't say which games you wanted to do; you had to offer a choice and be told which to make. And you had to buy the bloody cartridges upfront. They were $10 a pop, so if you wanted 100,000 cartridges that was a million [dollars] you'd have to pay.

The console thing changed things completely, and a lot of the smaller and middle-sized publishers just fell away. And a lot of developers who were publishing their own stuff also fell away. Consoles brought order, but they also shoved a lot of people out of the game industry, or forced them to join another company. I think, in a way, that was a great shame.

What's interesting to me now, some 25 years later, is suddenly we're back to not having the inventory issue. Suddenly you don't need to have cartridges or discs or anything at all. You don't need lorries and warehouses and shelf space and retail relationships. All of those things were a big part of the business and a major reason you could be successful as a publisher.

**Is that part of what finds you returning to a UK publisher, via the merger of Kuju and Curve?**

The fact is we went on [through Domark and into Eidos] as a company, from Sega through Nintendo and PlayStation to launch *Tomb Raider* in 1996. PlayStation had been out a little over a year, and it was getting momentum, and things just went to the Moon. We were lucky in a way, because we were one of the early ones with a real hit on PlayStation. In fact, I think we drove PlayStation sales in many respects. This was all fantastic, and I was delighted, but I'd spent quite a long time in the game, and all my investors had made a lot of money. I felt the job was done. I was living in California and had been there five years. My wife wanted to come home with the children, so it was time to exit stage left. That was around early 1997. Leave them laughing, I thought.

**Yet you ultimately came back to a more direct involvement in games again, with Catalis, which was set up as a services company for the industry.**

Things were wobbling a bit at [Kuju and Testronic owner] Catalis, so I took it over, and that brought me back into a nine-to-five – or eight-to-eight – in the game industry. We got things going great for Kuju and Testronic. So I'd been running both of them, essentially.

At Eidos, Wheatley oversaw the introduction of the most iconic British videogame character

SEGA

"IS BRITSOFT COMING BACK? YOU NEVER WANT TO REPEAT HISTORY, BUT WE CAN LEARN FROM IT"

But over the same four or five years we've seen this shift from disc product to digital, and we've seen Steam come roaring to life. We've seen PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 move to serve digital distribution, which has only increased with PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

A few years ago I wouldn't have dreamt of becoming a mainstream publisher with inventory and lorries and warehouses. I didn't want that cornucopia of crap that means you need about $300m just to enter the game. That was never going to happen. But now, suddenly, with digital distribution, all that matters is the game and, of course, the marketing. I was interested again.

**Does the digital distribution model almost return the situation to the mail-order days of old?**

It does. It's absolutely direct-to-consumer again, so we're slightly back to where we were. My heart is in being a publisher; I'd seen this change in the market and I'd been thinking about it for some time. And then I saw what Stuart Dinsey and Jason Perkins were doing with Curve Digital. They'd been going about a year-and-a-half, and ultimately we ended up buying them, which created this new piece of Catalis, which is what we call Curve Digital Entertainment, which brings in Kuju and its work-for-hire projects. And Curve, of course, is looking for independent developers doing great work, who could use a proper publisher to bring their product to market.

**So with what Curve is doing – and with the renewed prominence of publishers such as Team 17 – do you think we're seeing a return for the UK publisher, and a return to the 'Britsoft' era when UK developers and publishers were such a powerful force?**

Well, apart from Ubisoft – and possibly 505 Games, as it's Italian owned – most of the money publishers are raising, from an investment point of view, has been in America and Japan. So all of the biggest game companies – Konami, Capcom, EA, Activision and so on – are based in those territories. They've long had investor groups who have understood the business and had the courage to put money in.

I'm afraid in the UK we haven't had that kind of investment community. So while it's not impossible – and we managed to do it in the '90s with Eidos – I've not often seen anybody from a British standpoint be able to raise millions and millions and millions, because the investor appetite has been missing. But that was partly an issue of the investment in inventory.

We have to accept we didn't have investors with big balls here, so what do we do about it? Now the development effort is the major cost, and I think now there's a good opportunity to attract more significant backing – given that we've removed the inventory risk – from British investors. That could fund more British developers to make games, and publishers like ourselves and Team 17 to promote and market those games. So it's a good time, certainly. This is a moment in time where we can get back in the game. I'd love there to be not just one, but several big British publishers, creating jobs, exporting our creative work, and bringing dollars and Euros and yen.

Is Britsoft coming back? Well, you never want to repeat history, but we can learn from it, and I think there's an opportunity for British business being involved in game development and publishing. We haven't had that for a long time now. Could we create another Eidos? I don't know, but it's definitely possible.

And I think developers do need publishers more and more today, because there are so many games. There's a need again for publishers to help to promote, to market, to have relationships with the platform holders, and to get games on the store's promotion screen.

There's an alchemy to publishing and it's important again. And we'll also be commissioning games. There are people with good ideas who need money, so we can act as bank and publisher. That's a more traditional publisher role. We're establishing funds too. It's an exciting time.

And should we be doing $20 million or $30 million productions in three or four years' time? Absolutely. You've got to start somewhere.

**Does all this mean you'll stick to UK-made games?**

No. That's not the case. Already Curve has published games from places like Sweden. We'll remain open. We have to in order to be a commercial publisher. But there's no doubt our focus is on relationships with developers in the UK. We're supporting the UK, absolutely.

**Looking back to the dawn of Domark, and considering UK game production as it stands today, how do you think things compare?**

I think they've got better. We've got tax relief – that's a terrific benefit for the British game community. I think the environment today is far more game-friendly. You don't have to justify the potential of games any more. Organisations like BAFTA are helping games. There are more opportunities now and it's the right time to be getting into this industry in the UK. ■

**Curve's work in recent years has involved developing versions of games such as *Proteus* and *The Swindle* for Sony platforms, but in its new iteration the company has aspirations to grow as a publisher on various platforms**

# THE MAKING OF...

# PSYCHONAUTS

## Ignored to adored: how Double Fine's troubled debut made a spectacular comeback

**By Chris Schilling**

**Format** PC, PS2, Xbox
**Developer** Double Fine
**Publisher** Majesco
**Origin** US
**Release** 2005

Double Fine's founder and CEO, **Tim Schafer**, is a happy man. When we speak, the crowdfunding campaign for *Psychonauts 2* has just ended, raising $3.8 million. It's now a little over ten years since the release of its predecessor, a game that came alarmingly close to never seeing the light of day. That's a long wait for a sequel, but *Psychonauts* is an exceptional case, having found itself in the hands of twice as many players in the past five years as its first half-decade.

Still, that's a decade of fans clamouring for a follow-up. Is Double Fine doing this, we ask, simply to shut everybody up? Schafer laughs heartily. "In a way, it was a terrible failure, because now they're just asking for *Brutal Legend 2*. Which is good! It's a good problem to have. If people like something they like to ask for more, and it's not always the right thing to do to give them more because what they really liked is what you did the first time, which is make something up from scratch. *Psychonauts* is kind of the exception – there's more story to tell."

He's right: there is much more to tell about a game whose reputation has grown over time, with consistently enthusiastic word-of-mouth turning what was originally perceived as a failure into an unlikely success. It may have taken longer than anticipated, but this strikingly funny and inventive platform adventure has finally amassed a passionate audience, one that Double Fine had been told during focus testing would probably elude it. "They'd just say, 'It's got some problems,'" Schafer tells us, "namely the humour and the summer camp [setting]. So they wanted us to make it not funny and not set in a summer camp." He laughs again.

**Yet a happy ending** for Double Fine had looked all but impossible in 2004. *Psychonauts* had been in development for four years when original publisher Microsoft dropped the game, and Schafer had failed to find another buyer. He stood up in front of the whole company, then numbering around 30 employees, and had to tell them that the following week's payroll would be the last one. "My throat got all twisted up and I couldn't talk any more," he remembers. "Because we'd put everything we had into the game. We'd worked our asses off in crunch mode and now it was going to die and no one would ever see this game we made. It was all going to be for nothing and this whole company

**Raz's design differs significantly from that of original protagonist D'Art, who can be seen in the final scene**

was for nothing. It was just too much. I couldn't even speak, and we just sat there in silence for a long time." Schafer eventually told his staff they could all stay and get their CVs together, before heading back to his desk, despondent.

It was a particularly bitter blow, as by that time *Psychonauts* had represented a significant

## "MY THROAT GOT ALL TWISTED UP AND I COULDN'T TALK ANY MORE. WE'D PUT EVERYTHING WE HAD INTO THE GAME"

portion of Schafer's career. Double Fine was founded in 2000 and it was now 2004. But the initial seeds of an idea were sown during his time at LucasArts almost ten years earlier, during the making of *Full Throttle*. "I've always been interested in psychology and the idea of going on an interactive vision of some kind," Schafer says. He conceived an interactive peyote trip, where protagonist Ben would take the psychoactive drug before hiking into the desert on a vision quest. LucasArts, already concerned about the negative image surrounding biker gangs, wasn't keen on the idea. "They basically thought I was going make Sons Of Anarchy way ahead of its time," Schafer recalls. "And that was not the kind of biker story I wanted to tell. I wanted to tell a more romanticised [story], like a pirate adventure or a samurai movie. But I think going for a drug reference in *Full Throttle* was just too much for a family company."

At the turn of the millennium, with his own company, Schafer was finally able to pursue a more daring idea and conceived the notion of a boot camp for gifted youngsters with psychic powers. This wasn't to be the kind of adventure game with which he had made his name, but working in an unfamiliar genre was less about a desire to step outside his comfort zone and more to do with the games he was playing at the time. "I made adventure games because I was playing a ton of text adventures: I loved *Zork*, I played everything Infocom [released], so it made sense I would make adventure games. What first drew me to [3D platformers] was *Super Mario 64*, and then *Final Fantasy VII* and the first *Tomb Raider*. By then, it had started to feel a little fiddly to have to point and click – to select 'open' and click on a door to walk to the door and then go through it. I wanted to make a game that was still [about] puzzles, inventory and dialogue, but have the interface be less fiddly."

Schafer knew he had an unusual idea, and wasn't sure how he was going to pitch it. But he soon found a sympathetic ear. After delivering a speech at GDC, he was approached by Microsoft's Ed Fries, who was seeking to expand the Xbox portfolio. Fries promptly invited Schafer to a party for speakers at the event. "He gave me this little ping-pong ball with an X on it that was his calling card at the time, and he started talking about games as art, and that was something I had always been pushing for." Schafer reveals, too, that he also approached Sony, but Microsoft's terms proved more favourable. Sony, aware that this was new territory for Schafer, wanted to first see a detailed design document for a level before considering Double Fine's pitch. "Whereas Microsoft were like, 'Here are millions of dollars – we'd like to go,'" Schafer deadpans. "I mean, they did due diligence – 'We want to meet your team, we want to know what your experience is' – but they were more ready to go [for it] than Sony." Not that he blames Sony, conceding the publisher was right to be concerned about the studio's lack of experience. "I was pitching to Dave Jaffe at Sony, who wasn't the *God Of War* guy at the time. And [Jaffe and I] joke about that a lot. I'm like, 'You were probably right, but that doesn't mean I should've dealt with you guys. Who knows what would've happened?'"

Having struck a deal with Microsoft, Double Fine set to work. These were uncharted waters ▶

for Schafer: having been part of an experienced team proficient in its genre using a familiar engine, he found himself leading a fledgling team facing a steep learning curve, with much still to learn. It was already an ambitious project: inspired by Michel Ancel's work on *Rayman 2*, Schafer envisioned a game where every level would offer something new, not just a fresh aesthetic. "I don't want to name names," he says, "but in so many games you arrive on the scene, the theme of the level is explained, there's a barrier, you find a switch, you throw the switch, a bunch of platforms appear and you go forward – and that's repeated over and over again."

**All of this** proved time-consuming: staffers worked separately on individual game mechanics, but it was a while before they could be assembled into something tangible. Fries offered as much support as he could, but an increasingly anxious Microsoft, itself a relatively inexperienced publisher in the console space, began to demand more evidence of progress from the studio. "There's a negative cycle you can get into with publishers where if you're struggling for any reason, they start trying to quote-unquote 'help'," Schafer says. "They end up putting a kind of tax on you, because they want you to produce more documents to ease their worry that you're messing up. So you create more documents to show you're not and you go on these side courses and make special demos for them, and it all starts to put more and more of a burden on the project and makes things worse, not better."

Eventually, the problems came to a head and Microsoft asked for a vertical slice, tasking Double Fine with making a complete level and proving that the game was going to be fun to play. The stage chosen was Black Velvetopia, a dazzlingly colourful Spanish city patrolled by a rampaging, neon-pink bull. Everyone at the studio was happy with the results. And Microsoft? "They agreed!" Schafer says. "They said, 'It's fun – we're going to keep going with your game. We'll give you the extra money – we think this is worth it.' And then, just months after that, Ed Fries left." Fries' replacement was quick to justify his appointment, cancelling seven projects. *Psychonauts* was, of course, one of them.

If the situation seemed disastrous, for a time it was also liberating: now Double Fine could work on the game without any kind of publisher interference. Removed from the pressure to prove itself, it could simply keep iterating on the game, so by the time it was ready to pitch again, it would be in a healthier position – particularly from the standpoint of a potential publisher. "They would immediately be able to see it was great and just want us to finish it," Schafer says.

Finding a partner, however, proved more difficult than anticipated. Many publishers expressed their admiration for *Psychonauts*, but Schafer soon began to sense when a 'no' was imminent. "One by one, they all said the same ▶

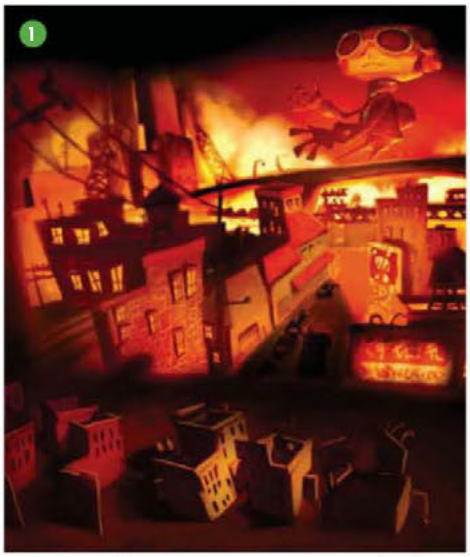
## Q&A

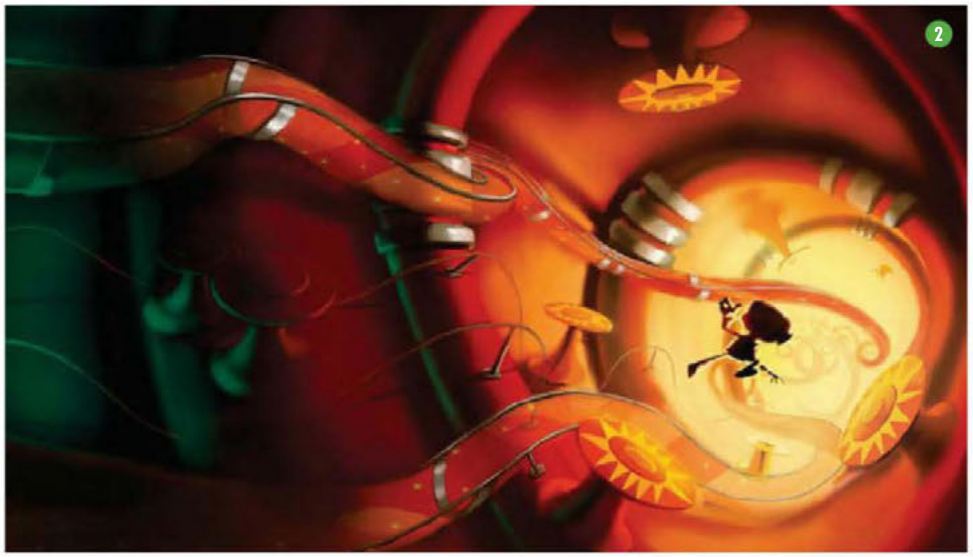
**Tim Schafer**
Founder and CEO, Double Fine

**What did you take away from *Psychonauts* that might affect how you approach the sequel?**
I think in the first game I approached it like an adventure game, where I worked on the story and the environments first. We were working on the protagonist at the same time, and by the time his movement came online it broke all of our levels. Ed Fries saw some of the struggles we were having nailing the gameplay and said, "When I visit developers in America, they always have these big, beautiful environments first and then they work on the central character; but when I go to Japan, they always build the character first and build out from that." So for *Psychonauts 2*, the first person I need is an animator, so we can get Raz working and then build a world that's fun for him.

**Are you aiming for a similar scale?**
Yeah, I believe we have 11 levels and two hubs in the first game, and we're going to shoot for that. It might change here or there, but the idea is to make it a true sequel. We're more experienced now, and we're also using Unreal, so we don't have to write an engine from scratch. We can focus on building the world.

**If Ed Fries hadn't left, do you think you would have ended up publishing with Microsoft? If so, would things have turned out differently?**
I think we would've published with them, but I don't know if the game would've been as good, because we would've continued on that spiral of chasing focus groups and publisher feedback approval. Sometimes you need a nice, quiet environment to listen to the game because I feel games tell you what they want to be if you play them. They tell you [adopts conspiratorial whisper], "I want to be bigger; I want some more mechanics." I think you need to have a little peace to hear the game talking.





1 Raz's duel with Kochamara is a comedic highlight, poking fun at boss battle conventions, with the latter loudly announcing imminent attacks: "Deadly… Triangle Beam! Overly… Intricate… Combination!" This kind of self-effacing humour is not, Schafer says, something that he necessarily plans for. "It's more when you're writing the dialogue, you're groaning to yourself, 'How do I explain that this thing we've all come to accept in games is being done again?' You can't help but comment on it."

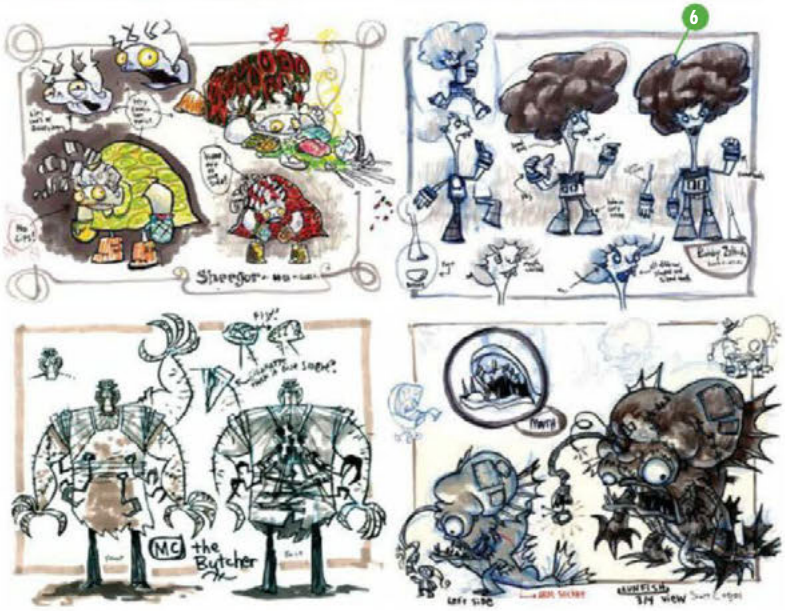
2 *Psychonauts* sustains a remarkable level of visual invention throughout.

3 Not all concepts were used, and other ideas changed during development.

4 The reception area of Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp, which hosts the opening sections of the game.

5 Schafer was worried that *Psychonauts*' final level, the divisive Meat Circus, was too difficult, but his lead tester responded that it was his favourite stage. "Looking back," Schafer says, "you never ask your lead tester if something's too hard because they play the game all day long, so nothing's too hard for them. They love a challenge."

6 Camp bully Bobby Zilch is memorably grotesque in design and demeanour



thing. We'd pitch it and we'd be terrified to hear the words, 'Oh, that's very creative,' because that was a sign that they weren't going to sign it." An adjective studios would welcome in a review was poison from an investor, because it meant passion project, not moneyspinner. "We thought being creative, being new, was [good]. Look at all the biggest hits, all the really big franchises in games: when they first came out they were extremely creative. *GTA* broke tons of ground, *Tomb Raider*... They weren't derivative games, you know? People shouldn't fear creativity the way they do. I mean, there are tons of derivative games that don't sell very well at all. I think the idea that if you play it safe you can make more money isn't necessarily true."

**Things were looking** bleak as publisher after publisher passed, but at the 11th hour a saviour appeared to have been found. "One publisher was really interested," Schafer tells us. "We had one great meeting after another, they really liked us and wanted to do it, and then they said, 'We're going to have one more approval meeting.'" But Double Fine couldn't wait: it had just about run out of money. The publisher asked for the studio's bank details to wire the money as soon as the deal was signed, and while Schafer was relieved, this didn't help with the immediate problem of paying his staff. He found a generous friend to loan him $250,000, which would just about cover the next payroll, before the publisher called back with bad news. The deal was not going ahead.

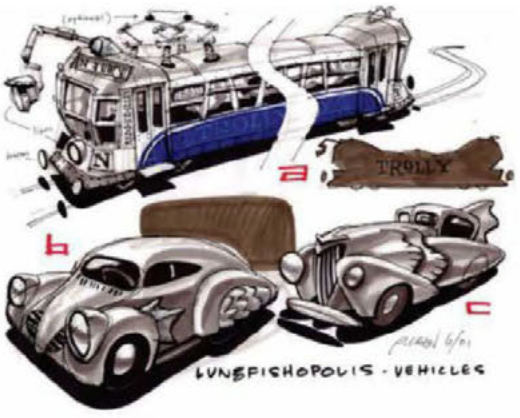
After informing his staff and sitting back down at his desk, Schafer began to leaf through the unread emails in the company's generic 'info@' inbox. Among a series of spam emails he spotted a missive from Majesco, offering to publish the game. Schafer raced from his office: "I said, 'Don't quit, you guys! Things are looking up!'" Relatively speaking, development was plain sailing thereafter. "This is a really strange analogy," Schafer says, "but have you ever dated someone where you fight a lot and you keep making each other change? And they keep making you change, and you become a better boyfriend or girlfriend because of all the demands, but then there's all these hard feelings because they asked you to make all these changes. Then you break up and you do all those new things for the next person you're dating, and they just think you're great."

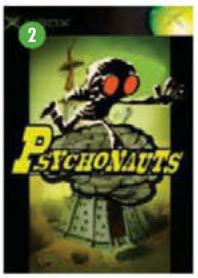
## PRYING CIRCUS

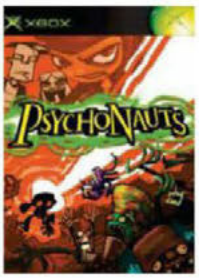
If a sequel wasn't exactly inevitable when Schafer wrote *Psychonauts* (alongside *Valve* writer Erik Wolpaw, then of satirical game site Old Man Murray), he already had plans to develop its narrative across multiple games. This is, perhaps, a clue as to what we can expect from a follow-up. "There was a backstory that involves a curse put on Raz that we hint at a little bit in the game," he explains. "He tosses off a line about his whole family being cursed to die in water and stuff like that, and there are some posters in the Meat Circus [stage] that allude to the other family in the circus that had a feud with your family, the Aquatos." It's such a subtle reference that Schafer was confident no one would notice, but he didn't reckon on the investigative powers of an obsessive fanbase. "It's funny," he adds, "that texture is really hard to see, but people have disassembled that game so much they found every single texture."

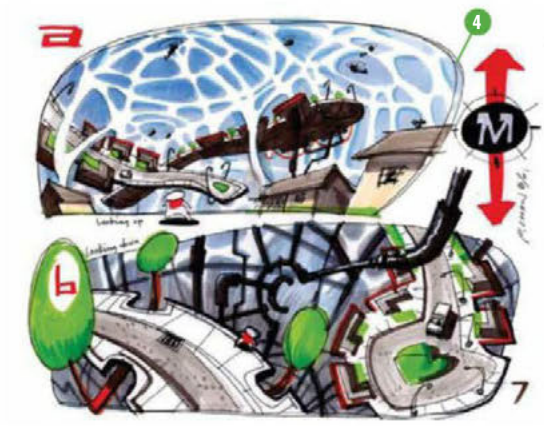
Keen not to interfere, Majesco let Double Fine get on with finishing the game, which finally launched in April 2005, to a positive response from players and critics. Yet history would record it as a flop, with widespread reports of just 100,000 copies sold and Majesco suffering severe financial difficulties as a result. It's a reputation Schafer is keen to redress, noting the first run of around 400,000 copies sold through, albeit not all at full price. "I was pretty happy it sold that many, but the story out there was that it was a flop and that was really frustrating for us. Even people who were supporters of the game liked [that narrative] so much they exaggerated the floppiness of it, because they like that underdog story: 'Look! No one appreciates great art!' I mean, of all the things you could talk about with *Psychonauts*, were its sales really the most important, exciting story to tell?"

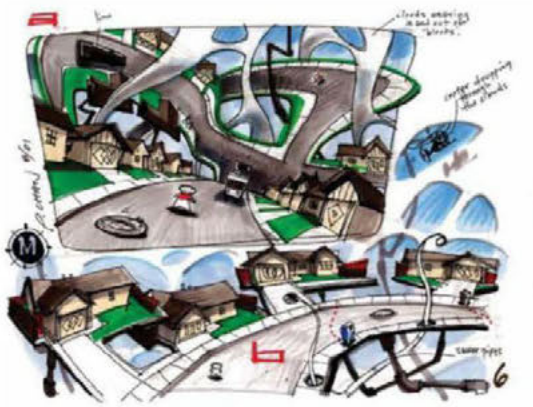
*Psychonauts*' own story captivated enough players that Double Fine reacquired the rights from Majesco in 2011 and has supported it ever since: just last month it patched the PC version of the game to make the infamously challenging Meat Circus level a shade easier. Little wonder so many people have been happy to invest in the sequel, for which Schafer and Double Fine are now much better prepared. "This time we're starting from a much more informed position," he says. "With *Psychonauts*, we threw a bunch of mechanics together from games we liked at the time. Now we know what *Psychonauts* is, and we just want to make a better one." ■









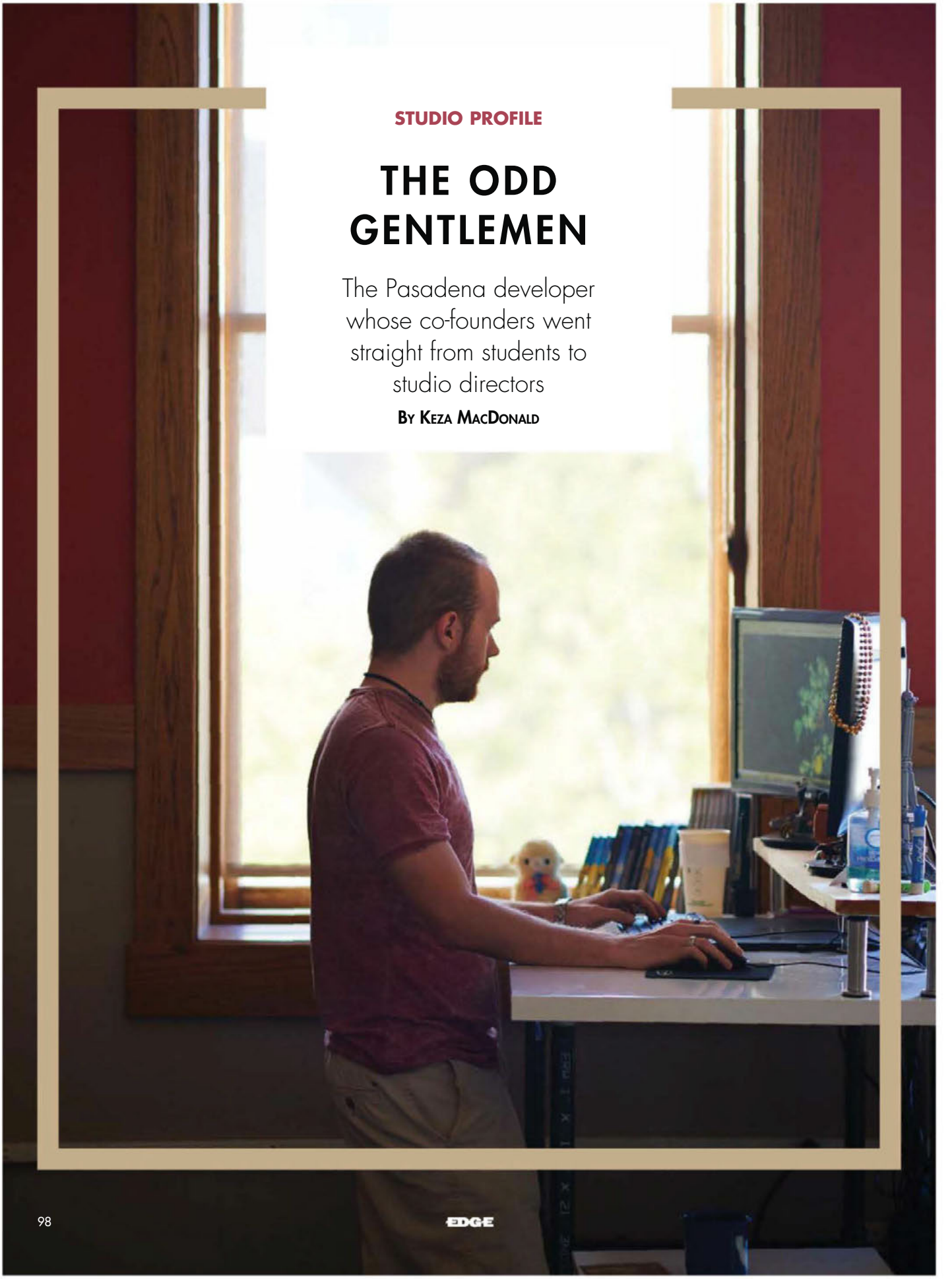
1 Entering the mind of asylum security guard and full-time conspiracy theorist Boyd Cooper leads to arguably the game's standout level: the dazzlingly dystopian Milkman Conspiracy.
2 A range of original boxart concepts. The design at the bottom left is closest to the version used for finished game.
3 A raft of unused logo concepts.
4 A glimpse of the elaborate geometry of The Milkman Conspiracy. Yet such intricate level design wasn't Double Fine's biggest challenge. "The hardest thing was having so many gameplay mechanics that had to work with the story," Schafer says. "For example, I wanted Raz to learn self-defence from Sasha, but we felt he should have a melee attack and we should put that in earlier. So we did, and I had to take out all of this dialogue where Sasha talks about how important it is to learn self-defence"

STUDIO PROFILE

# THE ODD GENTLEMEN

The Pasadena developer whose co-founders went straight from students to studio directors

By Keza MacDonald



**Matt Korba** and Paul Bellezza were students at the University Of Southern California in Los Angeles in 2007. Just a year later, they found themselves running a game studio. Its first game – *The Misadventures Of PB Winterbottom*, a whimsical and beautifully drawn puzzler that enjoyed favourable comparison to *Braid* when it was released on Xbox Live Arcade in 2010 – was originally Korba's graduate thesis. Having submitted it to the IGF and taken it to E3 with IndieCade, the pair ended up signing a publishing deal with 2K, and thus The Odd Gentlemen came into being. Appropriately, their very first office was in a University Of Southern California building, right above where they had worked on *Winterbottom* as students.

Bellezza has since moved on to Riot Games, but Korba remains with The Odd Gentlemen as president and creative director. He's a slightly shy, affable chap with enormous passion for the visual arts, theatre and game design, interests that are cheerfully evident in all of The Odd Gentlemen's games. The studio's latest break came in 2013, when it won the pitch to revive Sierra's classic *King's Quest* adventure series – the first game from which was released in 1984 – with Activision.

"I'd been meeting with Activision since I was a student – one of my advisers at university actually works there now," Korba explains. "I'd pitched them *Winterbottom* and some other stuff over the years and we were always trying to come up with a way to work together. I had a meeting where I showed them what we were working on and they really liked it, and that's when they mentioned that they were going to be re-doing *King's Quest*. We were really excited to even be able to audition for that project, to put together a pitch."

## Serendipitously, the original

Sierra-made *King's Quest* games were actually childhood favourites of Korba's. He grew up playing them with his uncle, and an old *King's Quest* handbook sits in the bookshelf above his desk, with a huge variety of other books from the worlds of film, art, design and videogames. *King's Quest* also dovetailed exactly with the kind of game that the studio wanted to make: humorous, family-oriented, fantastical, charming, intelligent.

"What we really wanted to try to do was make a family game, which not a lot of people attempt," Korba says. "But the generation that I'm in, which is the generation raised on the NES, we're starting to have kids ourselves now, and when I have kids I would like to be able to play games with them as well."

**Co-founder Matt Korba, now company president, started The Odd Gentlmen in 2008. Producer Lindsey Rostal joined after working in film production and the web tech industry**

The Odd Gentlemen had big plans for *King's Quest*. Rather than pitching a sequel that picked up where the earlier games left off, the studio imagined an elderly King Graham recounting his youth's adventures to his granddaughter, a framing device that allowed for any story they wanted to tell, and left room for nostalgic homage to the Sierra originals. "We wanted to make sure it was a game that people who had never played *King's Quest* could get into, but with plenty there for fans, too," Korba says.

On the strength of that idea, Korba's fandom, and a poster showcasing a hand-crafted, painterly art style, the studio won the pitch. "I have to give Activision credit because at the time we were a small team, we were maybe eight or nine people," Korba says. "We've grown since through this project, but they chose us because of our creative pitch. They could've chosen a company that had shipped more games, or had a bigger social media following, but they decided to go with us because they really liked our pitch and they really liked our team. That pretty much never happens in the videogame industry, where creativity rarely wins out."

At 24 people, The Odd Gentlemen is still quite a small studio, with desks crammed into the corridors as well as several small rooms — although they are plans for them to soon move into larger premises. At the time of our visit, they occupied a third-floor office with beautiful mountain views in Pasadena, a relatively quiet city less than half an hour's drive away from Los Angeles, where you can still get sunburn in December. The studio made the move from downtown LA partly for convenience (anybody who has ever been to Los Angeles will have suffered through its infamous traffic) and partly because the rent was climbing inexorably.

"We were getting cramped in that studio space and the prices in downtown LA are skyrocketing," Korba explains. "We wanted something that was a little more relaxing, somewhere we can breathe a little easier and walk places. I mean, I guess you can walk everywhere in downtown Los Angeles, but we wanted to walk around in cleaner air."

"Yeah, it's got kind of an old, small-town feel even though it's like 20 minutes outside of LA," says **Lindsey Rostal**, the studio producer. "It's a very nice little step away. We can live in the crazy world within our studio, up late into the night, but you still feel peaceful when you walk out of it. It's actually a very nice juxtaposition for us, a change of pace."

There's a laid-back attitude to working hours at The Odd Gentlemen. At 10am, there aren't many people around. By lunchtime, the desks are mostly occupied, and it's not unusual for staff to be at work until 2am. "Something that we try to cultivate in the office is sort of an improvisational attitude and culture," Rostal says. "A good idea can come from anywhere, so it's really important for us to build a strong, instinctual foundation for everybody there. It ends up being a very jokey and jovial office where people are constantly trying to come up with fun stories and gags

**"WHAT WE REALLY WANTED TO TRY TO DO WAS MAKE A FAMILY GAME, WHICH NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE ATTEMPT"**

THE ODD GENTLEMEN

**Founded** 2008
**Employees** 24
**Key staff** Matt Korba (co-founder, creative director), Lindsey Rostal (producer)
**URL** www.theoddgentlemen.com
**Selected softography** *The Misadventures Of PB Winterbottom* (2010), *Flea Symphony* (2012), *Wayward Manor* (2014)
**Current projects** *King's Quest* (2015–present)

**There is usually laughter coming from some corner of The Odd Gentlemen's Pasadena office, even towards the end of development on *King's Quest: Chapter II*. The relaxed atmosphere is a product of the studio's mission to make accessible and humorous family-friendly games**

that could potentially be used in the game. So we play boardgames together, have studio movie nights… We just generally enjoy each others' company and make a lot of jokes.

"Ultimately, we have a good time," Rostal says. "We're trying to make a game that's humorous and we think it's very important to also have a humorous tone in the office. To be able to pull that off, it's about getting a good group of people together who want to make something cool and have a great time doing it."

**The Odd Gentlemen's** employees come from all sorts of different backgrounds. Korba came straight from his film programme at USC and Rostal had previously worked at a number of LA film studios, but the various designers, artists and programmers that make up the rest of the studio have all sorts of varied experience. "I also have a degree in biology and I'm not the only one with a degree in biology in the office, which is pretty entertaining," Rostal laughs. "We've got philosophers, artists, everything else.

"It comes back to building that foundation for an interesting perspective. We wanted to have people with different backgrounds who apply what they know to games, becoming better game makers. Their experience allows them to think about problems differently, so we get different perspectives for puzzles, different perspectives for story, how to approach animation, how to accomplish what we want. That's an invaluable thing. If you can find a person who has a unique thought process about them and is obviously talented at what they do, they're only going to add to the studio."

The Odd Gentlemen certainly has some unusual creative processes. They team regularly uses pen-and-paper prototyping to sketch out scenes and puzzles, but it goes further than storyboarding – as well as staging paper-puppet shows, Korba has been known to walk around the office in character as one of *King's Quest*'s personalities, acting out potential dialogue and riffing with other designers ("I was a total drama nerd growing up," he laughs). A great deal of *King's Quest*'s stage-play feel comes from this physical prototyping.

"It's something that I learnt in [film] school, but especially with games that are story-based and puzzle-based, it makes a lot of sense," Korba says. "It's almost an art in itself to try to figure out how to paper-prototype a game, because it's not always the same. Sometimes it's like paper dolls, sometimes we use Lego, sometimes it's more like a boardgame or a D&D campaign. We found out that's a really good way to iron out the story, or the puzzles. If you have an imagination you can see what the game is going to be like, so we try to spend as much time as we can doing it in the physical realm first so that we can figure out what's working before we switch it over to digital."

The new *King's Quest*'s animated-painting art style is one prominent product of this marriage between physical and digital processes. After spending months trying and failing to get the game looking right using shaders, The Odd Gentlemen developed an unusual technique, printing out the 3D meshes and sending them to the studio's art director in France, who would then paint them with actual paint. The finished articles were then scanned, and the data used to texture the in-game models. So *King's Quest* looks hand-painted because it *is* hand-painted. It's the kind of approach that could only have come from thinking outside of the confines of traditional game design.

It seems that Activision hasn't hemmed The Odd Gentlemen in, either. The studio is currently two episodes into a five-episode series of new *King's Quest* adventures, due to finish in 2016. So far they've been well received, both by fans and their publisher. "We have a lot of freedom of creativity, which is really cool," Rostal says. "We can't speak highly enough of working with Activision. They've sort of just let us do our thing. As the person who handles the business stuff, I'm here making sure all these highly creative people get to do their best work."

**"YOU CAN'T EVER TAKE IT FOR GRANTED, BEING ABLE TO COME TOGETHER AND BE CREATIVE ON A DAILY BASIS"**

Working on a game series he adored as a child must entail significant pressures as well as delight for Korba. At the time of our visit, the second episode is just about to be submitted for certification, and everyone looks exhausted. But there is still a lot of joking and enthusiastic chatter buzzing around as the team settles in for a long night. "I feel like half the time I'm just a fan in the office," Rostal says. "I get to wander around people's computers and just get excited about what they're making. I'll know I have to head over and check something out when I hear giggles erupting from somewhere in the building.

"You can't ever take it for granted, being able to come together and be creative on a daily basis and see things come to life." ■

1 *Wayward Manor* was developed in collaboration with writer Neil Gaiman. 2 *The Misadventures Of PB Winterbottom*, originally Korba's student thesis, is a puzzler inspired by silent film. 3 *Flea Symphony*, the studio's first iOS game, is a colourful musical puzzler. 4 The new *King's Quest* is a five-episode series. The second chapter, *Rubble Without A Cause*, was released in December

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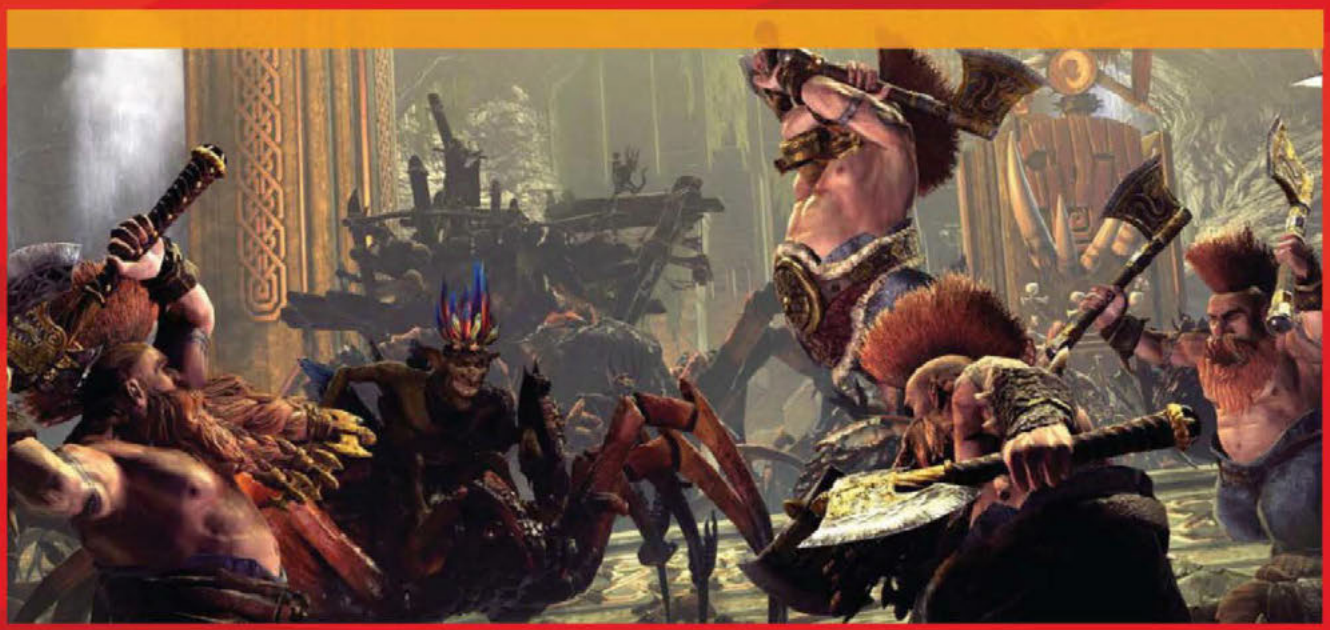

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# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING

**Soma** PC
A user-created mod entitled Wuss Mode transforms the way you play *Soma* by robbing its creatures of their aggression. Well, mostly: some of the fish still bite, and chase sequences remain in place. But nothing can inflict any damage on you. While it would be a game-breaking alteration in most titles, here you're afforded more time to drink in the disquieting atmosphere of Pathos-II.

**This War Of Mine** PS4
11 Bit Studios' harrowing wartime survival sim becomes even darker with the introduction of children into the mix. But the upsetting theme isn't the only thing that makes the console version harder to play. A lack of guidance, an inadequately small UI and inferior controls mean that, despite the additions – which include a new home base and fresh locations – the PC and iOS versions remain superior experiences.

**The Banner Saga** Xbox One
Stoic Studios' sorrowful tactical roleplaying game has taken two years to make the leap from PC to console, and there's not a huge amount to show for the delay. It also suffers from the usual lack of attention that PC-to-console ports so often exhibit. Even so, a cut-and-paste UI and clumsy controller mapping fail to undermine the game enough that they irreparably tarnish what remains an exemplar of its genre.

## REVIEWED THIS ISSUE


**106 The Witness**
PC, PS4

**110 XCOM 2**
PC

**114 Firewatch**
PC, PS4

**116 Gemini: Heroes Reborn**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

**118 Darkest Dungeon**
PC, PS4, Vita

**120 Oxenfree**
PC, PS4, Xbox One

**122 That Dragon, Cancer**
Ouya, PC

# Tale spin

Though wilfully reductive, the 'walking simulator' label emerged from a crude attempt to categorise the kind of narrative-focused firstperson experience exemplified by *Dear Esther*. Detractors take issue with a perceived lack of gameplay (in the traditional sense) and find no comfort in brooding atmospheres, layered storylines or the opportunity to explore new places.

But the kinds of games that antagonised those hidebound players were very much the product of a writer's vision, whereas in this issue we see two examples of the vaguely defined genre as interpreted by game designers. *The Witness* (p106) takes a simple gameplay premise and wrings what appears to be every possibility from it over the course of dozens of continually surprising hours. And then the game goes even further.

*Firewatch* (p114) similarly subverts expectations, though in another manner altogether. Campo Santo's tale of intrigue, isolation and human intimacy puts its story first, and then hints at traditional mechanics and gating, before revealing a much subtler take on player progression within its Wyoming canyons and wilderness. And like *The Witness*, *Firewatch* provides you with an unexpected level of freedom.

The parents of Joel Green might not have the pedigree of Jonathan Blow or Nels Anderson behind them, but *That Dragon, Cancer* (p122) also offers a fresh take on slow-paced exploration games, serving up its melancholy story in a series of vignettes that mix firstperson sections with minigames and kart racing. It's a loving memorial to, and celebration of, the child they lost to cancer. But like *The Witness* and *Firewatch*, it also points to a future of deep, nuanced storytelling that needn't be disengaged from abstract gameplay.

# The Witness

**Developer/publisher** Thekla, Inc
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested)
**Release** Out now

There's a moment of revelation late on in *The Witness* that profoundly changes your relationship with the game, elevating it from something already very special to a work of astonishing ingenuity. But we're willing to bet that most players won't reach that point, 20 or so hours in, because Jonathan Blow's latest game has a greater propensity to divide opinion than any other in recent memory.

And not least because of the remarkably steep challenge it presents. An open-world puzzle game, *The Witness* allows you to wander freely across an idyllic (if ecologically volatile) island as you tackle hundreds of electronic-maze-based conundrums. Blow's gloves come off early and you'll clatter into some real head-scratchers soon after leaving the cosseting fortress in which you begin. But these turn out to be nothing more than appetisers – before long you'll be scrawling out possible solutions on the back of all that post you've neglected to open, taking reference photos to back up your theories about a hint that seems to relate to something elsewhere on the island, and chastising yourself for so quickly concluding that a puzzle was impossible when the solution – or at least the first trace of one – finally swims into view.

Each labyrinthian puzzle has one or more entrances, represented by an enlarged circular portion, and at least one exit in the form of a short line with a curved end. Tapping X at any time will reveal a cursor, locking you to the spot – another tap while hovering over the beginning of a puzzle will create a crackling white line, which you must navigate to the exit before hitting X one last time to submit your solution. If you're standing close to a panel when you start, it will snap into fullscreen, but it's possible to complete them from greater distances – something that you'll need to bear in mind as the game's staggering ambition gradually reveals itself.

The constituent parts of these posers might be simple, but their execution is far from it. Your first panel is an easily executed straight line, opening the door at the end of a white tunnel in which you begin. From there the game wordlessly teaches you its mechanics while adding ever more complexity. You might have to separate or pair up components, trace particular shapes en route to the exit, or ensure you hit specific points on the grid. And then the environment starts to come into play in ways that add further convolution and depth to an already nuanced system.

We're being vague about the components and nature of the game's puzzles for good reason. *The Witness* is unapologetically difficult, but the feeling of achievement you gain from making sense of each puzzle – as your number of completed panels ticks up into dozens and then hundreds – is unmatched. As such, it's a game that's particularly vulnerable to damage from guides and walkthroughs – if you give in to temporary frustration and start to look up answers you'll miss much of what the game has to offer. Naysayers will protest that your only reward for completing panels is yet more panels, but this is a reductive viewpoint. The real reward is finding out what you're capable of when you put your mind to it, and watching the game's mysteries unfurl around you as you progress.

> The real reward is finding out what you're capable of and watching the game's mysteries unfurl around you

This continual flow of breakthroughs is delicately meted out by smart, unobtrusive gating. Each new concept is taught over a series of daisychained panels, with each solved puzzle switching on the following screen or piece of machinery in the sequence. Sometimes these screens are helpfully lined up in a row; other times you'll need to trace the route of the lit-up power cable, which connects your panel to the next one. For the most part this setup functions well, introducing and reinforcing concepts as you work your way through them in preparation for tougher configurations of the same basic rules, while additional simple puzzles are also cleverly employed as switches for things like doors, extending bridges and lifts. Very occasionally, however, adjacent panels can feel like they're missing an intermediate step, requiring a leap of faith rather than a logical solution. This can be especially problematic if, like us, you make the mistake of solving early panels and moving on without looking for other configurations: although it's never underscored, many have multiple solutions, and only seeing one of them can lead you to a woolly understanding of what's required of you later on.

**When you do** encounter these stumbling blocks, however, it's rarely progress-halting. The island is divided into 11 distinct areas, each one home to a set of puzzles that adheres to a distinct ruleset. You can reach all of the main locations on the island early on, either on foot or by boat (an automated cruise you can programme to deliver you to various locations – some of them only accessible by sea), so when you hit what feels like a brick wall, there's almost always something else to focus your attention on. There are plenty of isolated puzzles to find in addition to the main sequences, and observant players will notice that the island hides many secrets – a rabbit hole down which you can plunge much farther than you might expect. The result is a game that channels Lost as much as it does *Myst*, but adheres to a clearer ruleset than either.

Early panels in each area will react to your mistakes by showing the elements you've failed to account for flashing in red, while later puzzles will simply emit a disheartening honk and offer no clue as to where you went wrong. Some will even require that you go back to the previous panel and solve it again. Presumably intended as a way to stop players brute-forcing tough ▶

**ABOVE** The uninhabited island on which *The Witness* takes place is unrelentingly beautiful, and frozen in a perpetual state of tranquillity. **LEFT** Ruins of various ages dot the surface of the island, and many buildings conceal stairwells that descend to yet more areas beneath ground. There is much to discover

**BELOW** An abandoned town lies at the centre of the island and proves to be one of the more challenging areas. It encapsulates the game's mix of idyllic beauty and disquiet

**ABOVE** Panels often make use of the surrounding environment in ingenious ways, and the game's capacity for inventive twists on maze puzzles is dazzling. Such relationships become more complicated later on, however

Many of the game's puzzles will stick in the memory for their flair, but one of our favourite sequences takes place in a kaleidoscopic greenhouse that perches on a cliff. It also boasts some rather unapologetic lighting effects

puzzles rather than thinking about them properly, it's a punishment that also serves to discourage you from well-intentioned experimentation and feels overly punitive as a result. It's one of the game's few missteps.

**But this is** offset by the aspect of *The Witness* that makes it so challenging and so satisfying to best: an unwavering confidence in the player's intelligence. Solutions are never wilfully obfuscated, but you'll have to adjust your expectations when it comes to trusting in the puzzle and world design's ability to accommodate your deductive instincts. This is no *LA Noire* or *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter*, where analysis is simply simulated. Here, the unchecked ideas you have for solving a problem are more often than not the correct way forward. Finding yourself smiling in admiration of the game's construction becomes more frequent as you settle into the comforting realisation that nothing in this world has been left to chance.

Thekla, Inc continually toys with your expectations as it turns puzzle sequences into more than cold processions of logic problems, throwing in knowing winks and funny callbacks in creations that subtly build on, or subvert, previous solutions. For all the intellectual posturing, there's warmth and personality folded through the unblinking shapes and lines.

But it's the island itself that most clearly telegraphs the juxtaposition at the heart of this game. Flame-tipped autumnal woodland segues into bone-white chalk mines. The azure sea laps at pale golden sand on the coast. Crumbling architecture yields to blooming white and mint grasses, while biscuits of rust-coloured rock erupt from the ground around the base of a misty, snow-topped mountain. It's an environment of such overwhelming beauty that, early on, you'll spend as much time exploring and taking in the views as you do attempting panels.

**RECORD TIME**

While *The Witness* successfully manages to distance itself from most design conventions, Blow's not too proud to dust the island with audio diaries. They're not presented with the prominence often afforded to what are usually narrative crutches, however, and are mostly squirrelled away in corners off the beaten track. Nor do they relay an obvious narrative, instead containing quotes from philosophers, scientists and theologians. The musings are delivered by a cast that includes Ashley Johnson, who played Ellie in *The Last Of Us*, and Phil LaMarr, who, along with roles in the *Metal Gear Solid* series and *Shadow Of Mordor*, also played the unfortunate Marvin in Pulp Fiction.

Clever shortcuts and previously unnoticed pathways ease your journey around the space, calling to mind Hidetaka Miyazaki's devious world building, as you move between strange scientific installations and even stranger ornamental follies. *The Witness* is particularly adept at hiding its secrets in plain sight, and return trips to previously explored areas almost always yield new discoveries. On occasion, slow-moving, puzzle-controlled impediments make returning to earlier puzzles to check your working more of a chore than it should be, but these instances are rare, and navigating the intricately constructed island is mostly a pleasure.

*The Witness* conjures magic from the simplest of components, rustling up a sensational array of experiences without ever deviating from its core conceit. Five years of development and iteration have resulted in a densely packed, hugely rewarding exemplar for open-world design that packs in more ideas and surprises than most environments ten times its size. But reaching that epiphany takes an investment of time and mental acrobatics to which many players won't be prepared to commit, while still others will reach for a walkthrough and never experience the feeling of triumphant exaltation Blow so clearly intended. However, for those who find themselves aligned with its contemplative, singular ethos, even the inclusion of the game's most teeth-grindingly difficult puzzles will make complete sense.

**9**

# Post Script

## Interview: Jonathan Blow, founder, Thekla, Inc

With only a few panel solutions still eluding us, we speak to *The Witness* creator **Jonathan Blow** about his ambitions for the game and how he feels about the way things turned out – somehow avoiding spoilers in the process.

**The way you teach the game's mechanics is subtle.**
It's kind of amazing that that actually works, right? It depends what school of thought [a game designer is] in, but if you play a Nintendo game, there's a little character telling you every obvious thing over and over again for hours, right? And that's not the way that I like to do it, generally. When I designed *Braid*, I had the beginnings of this same idea. The puzzles in *Braid* mostly have a specific way that you solve them, and in the process of solving the puzzle that idea is communicated because otherwise how else would you have solved it? So that non-verbal communication idea became very interesting to me, and in this game I wanted to see how far I could push it.

**Are you happy with the result?**
On the one hand the format of the puzzles is very uniform. You come up and you see a panel and it's always the same interface – it's just a panel you trace something on. But that simplicity and clarity means we can vary things a lot in other dimensions. Some of those puzzles are trivial and other ones are very hard, and that means we can build a ramp between them, and because that ramp starts out very, very easy we can start by saying nothing at all. By the time you get to the end of the game, or even the end of any particular area, you probably have a very sophisticated idea of what you're doing. But if someone comes up and asks you, 'What are you trying to do to solve that puzzle?' and you try to say it, it's probably a paragraph or two of information. All of that was imparted without any verbal instruction whatsoever. It's interesting to me that games can do that, you know?

**How many iterations of puzzle ideas did you go through? Were there many ideas that didn't make it?**
I don't really remember exactly, but a lot of puzzles were cut. Certainly hundreds were thought about to some level or another, and designed to some level or another, and then didn't make it into the final game.

**How did you go about constructing them?**
Usually I don't have a specific path in mind, in part because I wanted this to be a game where there are multiple solutions to things. Almost the entire game I hand-designed, because randomised puzzles don't usually feel that good to me. They feel like they came out of a randomiser, even though that *can* be interesting. There are two puzzles in the game that get randomly re-rolled every time you try them, though. For those we randomly generate something, and it might even be unsolvable, and then we crank all our rules on it, and if the computer can find a solution then it gives it to you, otherwise it throws it away and generates a new one.

> "As far as I'm concerned, I'm designing a game where people will get out of it as much as they're ready to get out of it"

**The game encourages you to think laterally, but was it a challenge to then design around the potential for players' creativity?**
Players will think differently about different puzzles, and that's what a puzzle game is for: you're supposed to be having ideas about how to solve them, right? We have to be very careful in what we can control and what we can design for, to keep things clear. I think that's something most puzzle-game designers don't really do, actually, and it makes a big difference when you do it.

**The game's difficulty ramps up quickly. How do you feel about the fact that some players simply won't be able to progress beyond a certain point?**
Here's what I think about that whole thing... [The industry has] a very weird idea about game design. I mean, I guess it depends on what your intention is as a game designer, but – especially for the past few decades – we've had this idea of game design as a branch of consumer product design. If you think about it that way then, OK, the more people that your consumer product works well for then the better product it is. So from that standpoint, it would be a bad idea to have some of these harder and subtler ideas in *The Witness* because some people might not get them, so why don't we make them more accessible or something? On the other hand, if you look at other actual art forms and look at the works that people respect, they tend to be things that are actually very deep and that you don't completely get everything out of on first brush with them. And I feel that as we try to develop games as an interesting art form and as one that reaches its potential, we should have people going that way. I don't think there's a problem with people designing games as a consumer product. But again, if that's the only thing that's going on, or if designers don't make the distinction between that and doing something else, then maybe it's a problem. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm designing a game where people will get out of it as much as they're ready to get out of it, and if somebody is good at puzzles and is going to notice all of these things, and is going to play everything and like it, then that's great. I'd rather make something that those people can fully appreciate than scale it back so that more people can feel like they got everything. ■

# XCOM 2

**Publisher** 2K
**Developer** Firaxis
**Format** PC
**Release** Out now

A coin flip can have cruel consequences in *XCOM 2*'s turn-based battles. On the wrong end of a 50/50 flip, Martha Schwartz, with 31 enemy kills to her name, was mauled to death by a 12-foot-tall mud monster in a nameless European town. With the rest of the team dead, out of ammo, or ensnared by a giant alien snake, it was down to her to land the shot to save her life. She took out the wall of a nearby house instead, and was crushed unceremoniously seconds later.

*XCOM 2* is full of setbacks that feel horribly unfair in the moment. However, a post-operation inquiry would reveal a series of tactical errors in the run up to Martha's death. She was too far away from the group, and could have opted for better cover; a teammate might have sent a drone to boost her defence; the snake could have been eliminated by a grenade several turns earlier. *XCOM 2* is ostensibly a strategy game about overthrowing a totalitarian alien regime, but really it's a war against the forces of probability. Every move tilts the odds in a system that is primed to destroy you. It's tough, but completely gripping.

*XCOM 2* assumes that the campaign to defend Earth from alien attack in 2012's *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* failed. The aliens are in charge, and you must take the helm of a recovered alien vessel called The Avenger to track down resistance groups. You spend a lot of time looking at a cross-section of your enormous airship, clearing the alien detritus out of its bowels to install new facilities and crash-zooming on scientists to initiate research projects. From the bridge you access the world map, where you move The Avenger between continents to scan for resistance cells, recruit rookies and claim resource caches. These scans are interrupted by alien attacks and missions that require you to deploy soldiers and take charge in turn-based scenarios.

The strategic layer and the combat layer support each other beautifully. Every corpse you drop in battle can be sold or studied to unlock research and resources. Damage taken can put a soldier out of action for weeks, requiring a diversion of resources in the strategic layer that might otherwise be spent on research. Successful research in turn unlocks new gadgets and weapons that improve your troops' ability to survive a fight. Success means maintaining a favourable feedback loop between these two systems in the face of constant disruption. In combat, this is supplied by extremely dangerous Retaliation attacks that have you racing to save civilians under assault from the enemy's most dangerous troops. On the strategic end, a doomsday timer called the Avatar Project ticks towards your total destruction.

The game creates tension around the choice between expansion or consolidation. You set back the doom timer by hitting Avatar facilities, which means expensive forays into new continents. Do you delay and improve your equipment ahead of an incoming attack, or strike out into new areas? Likewise, in battle, most objectives involve hacking terminals and rescuing hostages against a turn limit.

The relationship between the combat and strategic systems, and the way both mirror the same dilemmas, is one of the exceptional aspects of *XCOM 2*'s design, and those dilemmas are expressed in a refreshingly bloat-free manner. You're only likely to have around six missions and scan sites at any given point, and combat encounters are largely meted out by the enemy. This carefully curates the points at which you can engage with the game, but rather than feeling limiting, it focuses complex management into a narrow series of important decisions. It's rare to play a strategy game where every decision genuinely matters.

> Ostensibly it's a game about overthrowing aliens, but really it's a war against the forces of probability

**UNDER THE RADAR**
You start most encounters incognito. Your soldiers can only be detected if you move them into clearly demarcated zones of enemy influence, fire a shot, or kick a door down loudly when moving through a building. These periods of stealth action let you set up cathartic ambushes. A soldier in overwatch takes reaction shots on the enemy turn, should an enemy move through their field of view. When in stealth, you can place all but one soldier on overwatch within range of the enemy. When you order the remaining soldier to fire at the enemy, they scatter. The motion sets off a chain of reaction shots. The camera whirls between your soldiers as they open fire one by one in an immensely satisfying show of killing power.

**That's also true** in combat, where the game punishes mistakes, to a problematic degree in the early stages of a campaign. Soldier classes and enemy types have been reinvented, though a few nods to *Enemy Unknown* remain. Sharpshooters replace snipers, but can now be levelled into gunslingers that can clear up weak enemies. The support class wields heavy guns and grenade launchers that can shred cover. The specialist's personal drone can be sent afield to defend and heal soldiers, or zap enemies. It can also be used to hack devices, but this is the most underdeveloped feature, a dice roll that can apply negative effects to the enemy, or let you take control of an alien unit for a few turns.

The fourth class, the ranger, is a good mascot for the directed risk-taking *XCOM 2* demands. The blade strapped to its back can down an enemy in one strike – vital against aliens that can quickly multiply and dominate a fight. The blow leaves the ranger hopelessly exposed, of course. At higher levels they can dodge all reaction fire as they run to their target, becoming an unstoppable homing nuclear option when a powerful foe absolutely has to be removed. These heroic moments, like every action in battle, are captured up close by dramatic camera angles that show off *XCOM*'s colourful aesthetic – detailed, but cartoonish enough to allow mechs to coexist with giant cobra monsters.

There's very little holding *XCOM 2* back. The stretch to your first armour upgrade is long, and during this period soldiers can be instantly wiped out by all but the weakest enemy forces. Occasionally the camera will wander through walls, or focus on a stationary soldier for half a minute before they execute their action. A lack of foreknowledge about how the game's technology will evolve hurts you on your first playthrough, too, but procedurally generated battlefields and a wealth of customisation and upgrade options, including paths for psychic and exoskeleton-augmented troops, means we'll be replaying for a hundred hours to come, cursing and scowling, but loving every minute.

**9**

**ABOVE** Alien artefacts retrieved from battles can be researched to reveal alien bases on the campaign map. These special missions move the story forward and, importantly, unlock new research avenues

**TOP** It's a bad idea to get this close to snake troops. They can wrap around a soldier and constrict them to death over a series of turns. **MAIN** It's vital to stay in cover and flank where possible, unless you're an alien mech. In that case you can stand in the open and shred everything with impunity. **RIGHT** *Enemy Unknown*'s pint-sized sectoids have matured into horrible mind-controlling freaks. They target rookies with low will stats and launch psychic attacks to throw them into blind panic

All but one of these soldiers have died since this screenshot was taken. Were their deaths the result of bad decision-making, or just plain bad luck?

# Post Script

## The fickle dramatics of chance

The success or failure of an encounter in *XCOM* can rest on the odds of a shot landing on a key target. If your warrior has a good weapon and is at the correct range, and the enemy is in poor cover, you might have a 75 per cent chance of success – a fact the game clearly broadcasts. However, fully understanding the odds does nothing to mitigate the sense of raw outrage when the shot goes wide. We got everything right: the positioning, the character build, the choice of shot. Doesn't the game owe us victory?

Games can be very flattering and accommodating, and wary of confronting players with the reality of total failure. *XCOM* has no such qualms, and consistently exploits the gap between our logical understanding of odds and our more intuitive (but wrong) assumptions of how chance operates for dramatic effect. *XCOM* tugs the superstitious part of us that sees conspiracy in a bad beat. In this emotionally charged headspace, a streak of against-the-odds critical hits becomes karmic retribution for past crimes committed by the random number generator.

It's a kind of madness, to apply the standards of universal justice to a machine that rolls dice, but *XCOM 2* expertly encourages this sort of thinking. A game of chance without meaningful stakes isn't interesting, as anyone who's tried to play poker with Monopoly money will know. Your soldiers are the stakes in *XCOM 2*. A detailed suite of character customisation options invite you to become attached to your people. They are lively, personable, and must be protected and nurtured over many battles if you want them to reach their potential. Seeing one killed in a trice feels awful. In that instance, rational mathematical understanding gives way to dismay, anger at the dice gods, and an urge for revenge. It makes for a very engaging strategy game.

Used in such a way, chance is an effective dramatic tool, and it's powerful because it's so inscrutable. When a game tells us that the shot will land 75 per cent of the time, should we trust it? We could run the scenario a hundred times and not see a 75 per cent success rate. Here, suspicion starts to creep in. Are enemies playing by the same odds? Is it really a one-in-four chance?

These are very reasonable questions. Sid Meier gave a talk at GDC 2010, fittingly titled 'The Psychology of Game Design (Everything You Know Is Wrong)', in which he confronted the problem of players incorrectly understanding odds in combat scenarios. He suggested that the development team tweaked behind-the-scenes odds to bring them in line with what players assume ought to happen in an encounter with a 75 per cent success rate (players assume a greater chance of victory). It's an interesting admission. For the sake of entertainment, player expectation trumps mathematical truth. It would spoil the fun to peel back the curtain and know for certain whether similar trickery is at work here, but given the number of soldiers who died during our review of the game, we would guess that there are no such coddling mechanisms in place. *XCOM 2*'s difficulty makes sense given the underdog scenario it presents, but it demonstrates how chance, and warped player assumptions, can be used as a manipulative technique to create a sense of struggle.

A heavy reliance on chance mechanics can be risky, of course. If a million people play *XCOM 2*, a few may well experience extraordinary runs of good or bad luck. For these outliers, the game balance may be significantly altered. *XCOM 2* gives players a few lifelines in the event of a bad streak, such as the option to buy expensive, levelled-up soldiers to replace losses, and theoretically, as in a long poker tournament or a game of test match cricket, the odds ought to shake out over time. It's hard to be sure, though. In this sense, the developers could well be playing their own game of chance. ■

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# Firewatch

**Developer/publisher** Campo Santo
**Format** PC (tested), PS4
**Release** February 9

Sure is pretty up here. It's just as well, really, since in the absence of just about anything to do, scenery is all this Wyoming national park has to offer. That, and solitude: protagonist Henry spends the summer up here as a fire lookout and won't see another face for the best part of three months. There are glimpses of other people, from time to time – a distant shadow, the flash of a torch – and the occasional old photo. But the Wyoming wilderness is an empty, lonely place. It's the perfect spot for those looking to clear a confused head and mend a broken heart.

Henry has both. The love of his life has been spirited away from their Colorado home to live with her family in Melbourne, Australia, after being diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's while still in her 30s. Campo Santo spends the first five minutes of *Firewatch* aiming straight for the heartstrings, and every shot hits home. It's a devastating, delicately handled and thoroughly unexpected way to start a videogame. Henry finds himself alone not through infidelity, death or the slow romantic atrophy of a longterm relationship. Instead this is a game that begins by putting a full stop on a marriage neither party wanted to see end, leaving Henry grieving for someone who isn't even dead.

He's a sympathetic figure, then, yet you're unsure about Henry before you've even taken control of him. He's a man who, faced with problems, has chosen to turn and run, flouting the line in his wedding vows about sickness and health. While he's clearly conflicted about the things he's done and the choices he's made, he settles a little too easily into his new gig.

Not that he has much choice. His first day brings an altercation with a couple of skinny-dipping teens who are setting off Roman candles in a park at peak fire risk. On his way back he glimpses a stranger who promptly vanishes, and when he gets back to his lookout he finds it's been broken into and trashed. They've even stolen his sheets. It's as elegant an introduction to this mysterious adventure as its heart-wrenching prologue, immediately putting you in a state of unease about who's out there, what they want with you, and what you're actually going to spend your summer doing. To talk about much more would be to spoil things, of course, but suffice it to say this is not the relaxing, cleansing summer Henry needed. There is suspicion, intrigue and a series of half-hints and semi-reveals before the central mystery, such as it is, is cleared up.

Henry isn't entirely alone, thanks to the near-constant availability on his handheld radio of Delilah, another lookout based a few miles away and veteran of a dozen summers out here. She is, by turns, Henry's tutor, handler, quest-giver, sounding board and confidante, and while she's aloof and dryly sarcastic at first, she soon warms up, and at times it's clear that her interest in you extends beyond the professional. If you play it right, anyway. When it's your turn to speak you're given a handful of choices, including the option to not say anything, and the dynamic of your entire relationship can change if you're not careful. Since she's all you have out there, a gentle hand might be the best approach.

Conversation is *Firewatch*'s main mechanic, though even during moments of radio silence this is no on-rails stroll. Clambering, mantling and jumping are all mapped to the same, single button press; objects can be picked up and examined, some triggering new conversation threads and others revealing an essential item or clue when moved. Simple navigation is one of the game's biggest challenges, requiring the use of a map and a compass that obscure your view and prevent sprinting when being used. While you're free to explore for the most part, some gentle gear-gating prevents you from accessing a few routes until you've reached the part of the story where they make sense.

Henry and Delilah become increasingly agitated by the implicit threat of some unseen, unknown antagonist, and at times the player gets the same treatment from the game's developer. Campo Santo might make you think you're in for a slog from one corner of the map to the other, only to fade to black and wind the clock forward to the next chapter. When making a short, story-led game, you'd forgive a little padding, but the pacing here is masterfully judged.

Henry and Delilah become increasingly agitated by the implicit threat of some unseen, unknown antagonist

**NEGATIVE OUTLOOK**
A firewatchman's lookout tower has all he could ever need – unless he needs the bathroom, in which case he's two flights of stairs and a sprightly walk away from the outhouse. Henry should, by rights, be spending the majority of his time up here, checking for signs of fire. After the first night's break-in, however, he seems to want to get out of there as often as possible. By the game's end it's used to signify his increasing agitation, the typewriter he brought to write thoughtful journal entries now being used for half-paranoid guesses at what might be going on outside, pinned up on the walls and windows. It's a bit of a mess by the end, too. Come on, old chap, we know no one's around, but where's your pride?

**Little mechanics are** introduced and made to feel vital for all of ten minutes before being subverted or abandoned. Your first task for Delilah involves rappelling down a shale slide, but the rope snaps when you're halfway down. You see a few more hook points dotted about and assume this is Campo Santo's way of gating off parts of the world – a feeling that lasts until the next day, when you find a backpack with an infinite supply of ropes. Dotted about are padlocked supply caches, which you expect will be hard to open and filled with goodies. Not only are they all unlocked with the same code (1-2-3-4, naturally), but they rarely yield more than a couple of books and a pinecone. The result is that *Firewatch* achieves this type of game's greatest trick – the setting, and subverting, of expectations – in not just its narrative, but its mechanics too.

The story's the star, of course. Campo Santo's writers previously penned the first season of Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, which spun an elegant, affecting yarn about finding humanity where you least expect it. *Firewatch*, too, is a game of contradiction: one about a man grieving for someone who isn't dead, falling for someone he's never seen, fearing a place he expected to give comfort and, later, finding only sadness in safety. It conjures suspense and heartbreak from the tall trees and winding creeks of the Wyoming countryside, in a short game you won't forget in a hurry.

**8**

LEFT See those mountains in the distance? You can't go to them – sorry. This is not an enormous world, by any stretch, though Henry's near-total isolation makes it seem bigger than it really is. BELOW The game looks delightful on PC. It feels great, too, with Henry's sprint making a nonsense of the term 'walking simulator'

ABOVE There's no day/night cycle here; instead Campo Santo decides what time of day it is as it goes along. Most chapters are set in daylight, though, making the occasional stunning sunset all the more affecting

The wilderness lacks landmarks, but you quickly make up your own through experience. This lake, for example, will forever be associated with the skinny-dippers you encounter on your first day

# Gemini: Heroes Reborn

**Developer** Phosphor Games
**Publisher** Imperative Entertainment
**Format** PC (version tested), PS4, Xbox One
**Release** Out now

*Gemini* presents a sad inversion of conventional wisdom: that a big licence is the best way to squeeze some life out of a bad game. It's unlikely anyone would call this a great one, admittedly, but there's no getting around the fact that its Heroes Reborn heritage drags it down, rather than the other way around. It's tough to recommend playing, or paying for it, but at the same time it deserves respect for what it does with very little.

Wisely, it has as little to do with Heroes as possible, primarily borrowing a few terms like 'Evo' (evolved human – ie, a person with special powers) and throwing in the occasional mention of Hiro Nakamura and the Renautas company without really tying itself to their stories. Instead, it's the tale of a girl named Cassandra and her friend Alex, trying to break into a strange installation called The Quarry in search of information about Cassandra's missing parents. This goes as well as can be expected, and Alex is captured – fortunately, just as Cassandra discovers a natural knack for several flavours of time manipulation.

At this point, forget the plot, forget the Heroes Reborn universe, forget the budget price and, in the unlikely event that you remember the previous Heroes Reborn tie-in game, forget *Enigma: Heroes Reborn* on mobile. *Gemini* has one trump card: serving up fun powers in an interesting, if ultimately unexciting, location – borrowing from the likes of *Singularity* and *BioShock* and *Psi-Ops* to turn Cassandra from a regular college girl on the run into a reality-bending juggernaut. Everything else is irrelevant, especially since it's been a fair while since those games or anything else that's played around with time and space in the same fashion.

The first power is the most novel, and only really possible due to the game's short length – about four to five hours. The game takes place in 2014 in a collapsed installation, but at any time you can open up a window and spy into 2011, and then shortly afterwards flip between the two at will and use both the time-sight and instant flipping to go through locked gates, to climb over collapsed pieces of scenery, and to watch guards wander past before you simply time-slip behind them in the most overpowered stealth technique since *Dishonored*. Both timeframes have guards, but not the same ones. The trick therefore soon becomes jumping effortlessly between timeframes to get around and past both them and any obstacles in safety, as well as finding ways to keep pushing forward through the present day's collapsed scenery and high security in the past. This is a great ability, and it's interesting to vault between past and future so fluidly. While the base design is nothing special, aside from a few good sections of ambient storytelling, it's hard not to want to see it borrowed for something like *Tomb Raider* at some point – to peer past the ruins and see them in their prime.

Tedious dialogue only highlights Portal's genius in, to use the technical term, letting you bloody get on with it

**ENIGMA VARIATIONS**
The other Heroes Reborn tie-in game, *Enigma*, on tablet and smartphone, shares a fair amount with *Gemini*, but even more with *Portal*. You're another teenage girl called Dahlia, using skills such as time-shifting and telekinesis to try to escape a sadistic testing course. *Gemini*'s approach feels fresher, largely due to feeling like an adventure rather than a series of capital-P Puzzles. None of the characters are part of Heroes proper, though, nor is anything that happens there important for following the story in the games. But both games are endlessly better and more respectable than *Evernow*, the show's hilariously fake RPG starring Katana Girl, which begged the question of whether anyone involved had ever even seen a real game in action.

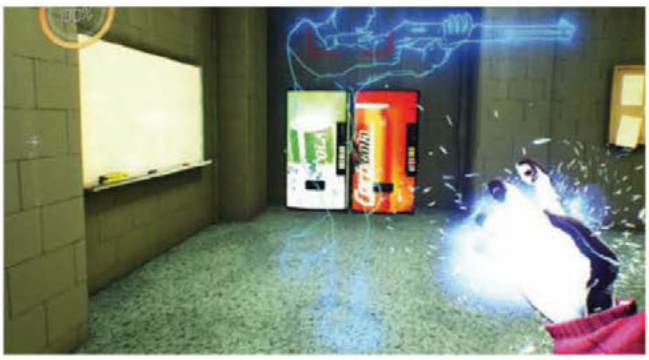
It helps that *Gemini* doesn't bother trying to restrict it, or most of its others. Slowing down time has, ironically, a timer, but otherwise you're allowed to cut loose without worrying about stamina, mana or other artificial restrictions that would get in the way of the fun. You also don't have to play defensively. Cassandra doesn't use guns, but she soon acquires telekinesis courtesy of a big, painful-looking syringe that looks like it came straight out of *BioShock*, and the basic powers keep evolving. Slowing down time and combining it with telekinesis, for instance, lets you grab enemy bullets in mid-air and return them, or simply throw the guards around like ragdolls. Some of them, at least. Others are too heavy, too well prepared, or too fast for that to work, demanding new plans and occasionally zipping through time to wait until they're standing closer to potential ammunition or at least facing away from the next door into the base.

**It's this that** elevates *Gemini* from being a basic corridor shooter into something that at least justifies its existence, even if it fails to demand that you buy it. It's clumsy. The AI is terrible. The plot constantly intrudes with long and tedious dialogue that only highlights *Portal*'s genius in, to use the technical term, letting you bloody get on with it. It's bad enough to be stuck in one place listening to two uninteresting characters exchange banter without it generally being of the level that uses "Hey, check out these dope SMART GLASSES" with no apparent sense of irony or well-deserved shame. There's also very little challenge, with Cassandra's unspoken power apparently being to absorb bullets and convert them into the fastest recharging health in gaming.

And yet, when it flows, and you face a room that encourages you to play with your powers instead of worrying about finding the 'right' path, it works. At the very least, the time-spying mechanic cries out for its own game on a bigger budget, without the lingering sadness of being tied to a show that peaked in 2006 and spent the next decade a shambling corpse dripping with sadness for how much more it could have been.

Even at its best, *Heroes Reborn: Gemini* can't hope to be one of those games that breaks out of licensed-game purgatory. Unlike most, however, it genuinely tries, with some clever and well-executed ideas, and the fact that it struggles to live up to their potential ends up being, to at least some point, a mark in its favour. It would have been so easy to churn out a basic FPS cash-in. Instead, *Gemini* takes the time to create a game that feels fitting for a new Evo in the Heroes Reborn universe, even as the show itself fades away, and it deserves credit for that – for its ideas, for much of their execution, and for ending on the hope that one day they'll get the game they deserve.

**4**



ABOVE The Quarry has enough variety for *Gemini*'s running time. It's not the most inspiring of locations, but it at least feels like it's been designed for a purpose – and it isn't another pure physics testing facility

MAIN The time-spying mechanic works superbly. Jumping between timeframes is instant, and spying gives a great sense of power over the unaware guards.
ABOVE Telekinesis works on guards too: smash them into walls, hurl them into each other, break their necks. No picking up their guns and shooting them, though, because that would be murder.
LEFT Yes, the SMART GLASSES. Featuring such advanced speech-to-text, they'll transcribe what people say before they've even

# Darkest Dungeon

**Developer/publisher** Red Hook Studios
**Format** PC
**Release** Out now

Developing *Darkest Dungeon* over the course of a year in Early Access must have felt a lot like playing it: spinning plates, struggling to reconcile nested systems determined to disagree. You spot a wobble, adjust and attempt to recover, but gravity takes hold – mathematically, you're doomed. If you're not clobbered by the game's horrors, you might run out of cash curing heroes of rabies. Pushing them back into the dark too soon could induce a heart attack, or their minds might snap, or they could die of hunger. Every conceivable step is a further descent into insanity. It's this astounding confluence of systems, in a perfect state of imbalance, that makes this one of the most enthralling games to crawl from the Roguelike cadaver.

It's also one of few games to exploit and, to an extent, emulate the works of HP Lovecraft successfully. It owes not so much a debt as a family fortune to The Rats In The Walls, a tale of an old family home on a crag that calls its owner into the depths and to madness, but it borrows from the breadth of Lovecraft's bestiary. In *Darkest Dungeon*, a relation writes to you, confessing his folly at seeking forbidden powers deep in his estate's foundations, unleashing – as tradition dictates – nameless horrors. As heir to the family seat, you're honour-bound to eradicate the evil.

This sort of pest control is not a one-man job: from the hamlet at the foot of the crag, you command a gaggle of adventurers of various classes, from the brawling and buffing Man-At-Arms to the shapeshifting Abomination. You dispatch four on any one run, and the viable combinations are delightfully many. Each class is a meaningful variation on its comrades, so you have the option of recruiting multiple heroes of a select few classes to continually field parties you feel comfortable with, or to diversify, confident that there will be something in your toolbox for every encounter. The Vestal, for instance, is an all-round healer and support character – she has a weedy single-target heal, a still weaker group heal, and a stun. Her opposite number is the Occultist, who has a ferocious single-target heal that comes with an unfortunate risk of bleeding.

These spells are the core of straightforward, turn-based battling. While crawling procedurally generated dungeons, ghoulies will spring up and trade blows with you until none remain, you fall in battle, or you leg it. The missions that space out the story-centric boss fights typically require you to kill every horror in the dungeon, or explore a given percentage of rooms – there are other kinds, but these are the staples, and for the first and final hours in particular the rote nature of it can be wearing. You'll need at least three full max-level parties to beat the game, so there's no avoiding some grinding. In addition, though the comic book artwork is uniformly outstanding, there's little variety within each dungeon. However, *Darkest Dungeon*'s strength isn't the range of its activities, but the number of ways in which its limited menu can go badly wrong.

It's a surprise to find that this relentless numerical tangle of a dungeon crawler is a human story

**WHISPERER IN THE DARK**
Your relation, who wrote that fateful letter summoning you to the family abode, narrates actions and events as you traverse the underworld, and without his interjections much of the gravitas that accompanies simple decisions would be lost. Each observation is presented in an approximation of Lovecraft's weighty, suspenseful prose, sometimes too consciously grandiloquent but close enough. Voice actor Wayne June takes credit for much of the impact: like the narrator of The Rats In The Walls, cracks in his sanity are suggested rather than stated. His narration is authoritative but afflicted by strange pacing and stumbles, a reflection of the exhausting dungeon itself. It's a rare developer that handles Lovecraft with such skill.

**It's a surprise** to find that this relentless numerical tangle of a dungeon crawler is a human story. More interesting than the spells heroes can sling at the enemy is how their character develops in the face of darkness. Along with physical wounds, confronting monsters is a source of stress, as is the guttering light of a dying torch, stumbling into traps or reading unsettling passages from dusty tomes. If an adventurer's stress passes a certain point, their resolve is tested, sometimes resulting in a powerful second wind, but most often hastening dementia. They develop an Affliction, becoming abusive, hopeless, selfish or something worse. Selfishness is bad enough, the sufferer often shuffling to the back of the party in the interest of self-preservation. Madness, meanwhile, destroys groups from within. Every character has quirks, too: personality flaws that may mean they're obsessed with corpses, collecting diseases quicker, or they suffer kleptomania, pocketing loot left, right and centre. A scattershot Arbalest with a lazy eye was a disastrous combination.

Thankfully, the hamlet allows heroes to de-stress, be purged of disease and receive counselling. The dungeon crawl doesn't really end when you complete a mission – the next crucial test is of your budgeting. Each debuff requires gold and patience to remove, and only one can be treated at a time. Worse, whatever treatment option you choose, that hero will be unavailable for the next mission. In town, the truly agonising choices present themselves: is it better to address your Crusader's masochism, which limits healing, or treat his lethargy? If he's particularly awkward, he'll refuse to de-stress through anything other than a favourite pastime, such as gambling or flagellation, activities that can be locked out temporarily by the hamlet's wandering caretaker.

Micro-managing your party is demanding, but it's suicide to neglect longterm progression. The dungeon is waxing in power, and if your adventurers don't keep up, you'll hit a difficulty wall before permadeath forces you back to the main menu. The Guild and Blacksmith become yet another drain on your funds, allowing you to upgrade skills and gear for an extra edge.

The different systems within *Darkest Dungeon* are so densely coiled that it becomes impossible to see where one ends and the next takes over. This is an honest, hardcore dungeon crawler propped up by nested mathematics and – naturally – dice rolls, but their interactions are so occult that there's no gaming the system, no snappy calculation you can perform to arrive at the best course of action. You're left to rely on gut feeling and a gaggle of have-a-go heroes who are haemorrhaging their marbles – the harrowing, captivating reality of adventure.

**8**

**RIGHT** Missions are spilt across five key areas, each a new corner of Lovecraft's lore. The Weald hosts fungous beings, Ruins undead, Cove fish-folk, Warrens swine and flesh. Then there's the Dungeon itself. **MAIN** Action takes place through static 4v4 scenes cut with simple but effective animations for attacks (and panic attacks). The dimming light and doomsaying narrator are enough to give it life. **BOTTOM** Arriving back in the hamlet after a successful run provokes palpable relief. After assigning treatments where required, it's tempting to rest well, and to fully collect yourself before the next adventure

**ABOVE** Beneath the crag that supports your family seat lurks the final challenge: the gateway to the Darkest Dungeon itself. It's a straight, pleasing lift from HP Lovecraft short story The Rats In The Walls

# Oxenfree

Five teens visit an apparently abandoned military island to drink, party and investigate weird signals emanating from nearby caves. What could possibly go wrong? *Oxenfree*'s premise is Teen Horror 101, but there's something more interesting bubbling beneath the surface. Its early stages in particular are rich in intrigue and humour. Predictably, the group is soon separated; as Alex, you're asked to reunite with your friends, while figuring out what's going on. Are they dealing with a temporal anomaly, an extraterrestrial presence, or ghosts? Should she search for best friend Ren or try to mend fences with the astringent but clearly unsettled Clarissa? And when will hanging around with her new stepbrother stop being awkward?

This adventure is at its most convincing when dealing with the social pitfalls of adolescence. The script is occasionally a little too knowing, with the kind of whip-smart exchanges you'd expect to hear in a postmodern Hollywood comedy-horror, but at other times it carries the ring of authenticity, dealing skilfully with each character's anxieties and frailties, with a fine voice cast bringing this dysfunctional fivesome to life.

Its dialogue system, meanwhile, is ingenious. Choosing between up to three responses in a given situation is nothing new, nor is being afforded the option to stay silent. But you can interject when things get heated or you're in the mood to quickly take charge, or even register your disinterest or disapproval by wandering off – and your friends will respond if you do. As a result, conversations have an organic flow, with interruptions sounding much more natural than usual. The interface is similarly elegant, spartan often to the point of invisibility: tiny circles denote interactive objects, while a small dial appears whenever Alex tunes her portable radio into various strange frequencies.

Although it's not unexpected that the setup should be more persuasive than the payoff, *Oxenfree* stumbles well before the finish. Its pacing is hindered by slow movement speed, and nuance is lost as the incidents increase in frequency and topics of conversation shift from the social to the situational. Its tone, too, is inconsistent. Despite a strong undercurrent of horror, no one ever seems sufficiently perturbed by their predicament. The camera doesn't help, either, creating a literal and metaphorical distance between player and protagonist, while diminishing the clout of the occasional shock. Considered in isolation, there's not an awful lot wrong with *Oxenfree*'s component parts. However, like the disparate personalities thrown together on Edwards Island, making them gel is another matter.

**6**

**Developer/publisher**
Night School Studio
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
**Release** Out now (PC, Xbox One), TBA (PS4)

**WALKIE TALKIE**
*Oxenfree* has no puzzles worthy of the name, but that hardly matters when the mystery is fresh and the dialogue is fizzing. Beyond exploring and chatting, your third job is to fiddle with the dial on Alex's radio, but on occasion you'll also face arbitrary tests, failure of which carries a heavy penalty. These add fleeting notes of panic, but it's unfair they should have such an impact on the story, not least given the lack of clarity in the speech of your seemingly otherworldly examiner.

**By coincidence, one plot development is closely reminiscent of a recent narrative adventure – though it would be a spoiler to reveal which one. That's not a criticism, but its recurrence may not have the desired impact**

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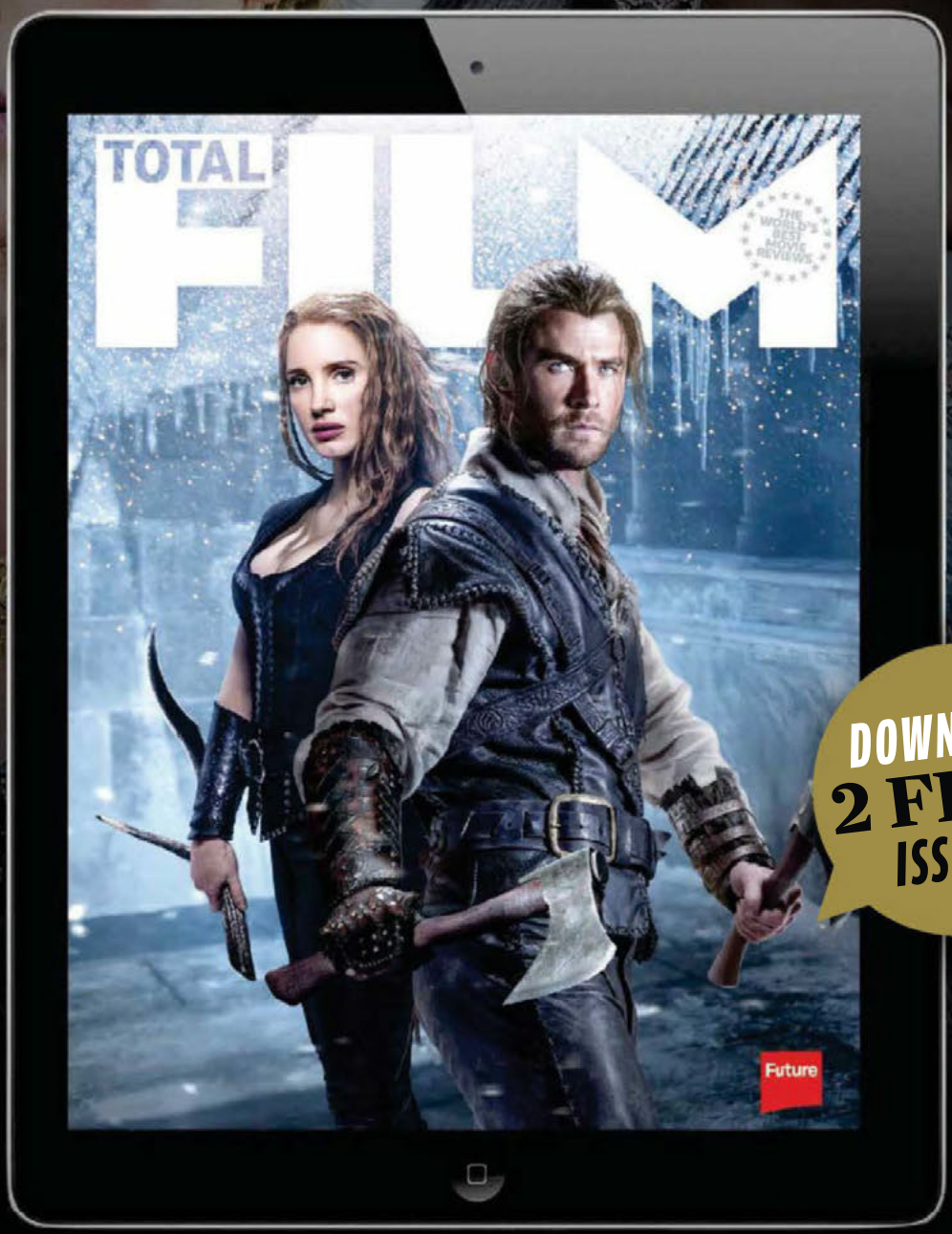


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# That Dragon, Cancer

Many virtual dragons have fallen at our hands. For once, however, we find ourselves in the presence of a beast that cannot be slain. On March 13, 2014, five-year-old Joel Green died, having lived with terminal cancer for four years. His parents Ryan and Amy had already opted to chronicle Joel's short life in a videogame, and have done so in the form of 14 short vignettes, which movingly follow the family's response to the diagnosis.

At times, their approach is unexpectedly playful. The striking, beautifully lit low-poly art is presented from numerous perspectives; we view the world through Joel's eyes and those of his parents, but often we're an outside observer. Though this sometimes makes for an uncomfortably voyeuristic view of a family's pain, the very first sequence casts us as a duck, paddling towards Joel and gobbling up chunks of bread thrown by his siblings. Joel joins in and promptly lobs the rest of the loaf into the pond. Later, he's the star of a rudimentary kart racer, picking up colourful collectibles that are quickly revealed to be his various cancer medicines.

The humour is understandably of the darkest hue, but there are rousing moments of lightness here, as we witness memories of the Green family's small victories, punctuated by Joel's own infectious chuckle. If the sparsely animated figures can't quite match the emotive force of the words, delivered by the Greens themselves, it uses metaphors inventively to convey more abstract ideas and feelings. One sequence sees Ryan treading water, before allowing himself to slip beneath the surface, where he's surrounded by pulsing, urchin-like tumours: a devout Christian struggling vainly to square events with his beliefs. Elsewhere, a nightmare sees Joel floating towards the Moon, his flight cut short by rows of malignant growths that become impossible to avoid.

At times, it struggles to find a suitable role for the player, but the most successful episodes find ways to hold us captive. A bravura sequence sees Amy and Ryan ask their kids to imagine Joel battling a dragon while the player does so on an arcade cabinet. This is juxtaposed with a horrifying scene where an exhausted, exasperated Ryan wanders around a hospital room, unable to pacify his screaming son, as he questions the faith upon which his wife is able to lean for support.

But amid the pain there's hope here, too. *That Dragon, Cancer* invites us not only to share the Greens' grief, but also to commemorate life, and it will surely offer some comfort to those experiencing similar anguish. However, even if this heartfelt eulogy only helps the Greens come to terms with their loss, it will already have fulfilled a vital purpose.

**8**

**Developer/publisher** Numinous Games
**Format** Ouya, PC (tested)
**Release** Out now

**CARDS WITH HUMANITY**

Having initially obtained funding from Ouya, Numinous Games launched a Kickstarter campaign to get funds to finish the game. Among its many achievements, *That Dragon, Cancer* is notable for the most sensitive and unobtrusive in-game backer rewards to date. Contributors were asked to share pictures and messages of relatives lost in similar circumstances. These appear in cards placed on bedside furniture and strung across rooms, and as art framed and hung on the hospital walls.

**Stinging truths are found in even the more mundane observations: a weary Ryan sneers at the supposed 'healing' colours of the hospital decor, before briefly turning his ire upon a clammy and irritatingly small vinyl chair**

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# Fire Emblem: Awakening

The tactics game that's about relationships as much as battling

**By Alex Wiltshire**

**Developer** Intelligent Systems **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** 3DS **Release** 2013

One of the grandest, most sweeping games of the past few years is also one of the smallest. With a tale told across continents and generations, and featuring dozens of characters, *Fire Emblem: Awakening* is a handheld game released in 2013 that many players will still be plugging away at – or at least have ambitions to. Within its clockwork systems is woven a special kind of videogame magic, combining Intelligent Systems' trademark polish (in which every cursor movement, animation and pixel is just so) with sure passage through a story, and freedom to explore rich, exacting and flexible strategy.

Its secret is in how it all comes together, how these features interlock. It's a game that you play at multiple levels simultaneously, where turn-to-turn decisions pull through into campaign-spanning ones, and where each battle not only has a set objective, but as many self-set and informal ones as you care to take on.

The only way to play *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, of course, is in Classic mode. Here, when members of your band of roving soldiers die in battle, they're gone forever. Well, sort of. Actually, they elegantly depart with a few words of regret, but the point is clear: death means the end. That's the way that *Fire Emblem* always worked until *Awakening*, where the addition of Casual mode, presumably as some contemporary concession to accessibility, caused ill-deserved consternation from players concerned that it marked the dumbing down of the series. Absolutely not. If anything, there's even more to consider in *Awakening* than ever.

So why is Classic mode so essential to playing *Awakening*? It's not purely about submission to tradition, but it's important that *Fire Emblem* remains distinct from other tactics games, including Intelligent Systems' other strategy classic, 2001's *Advance Wars*. And at the heart of that is its addition of RPG elements: its units are characters, and you steadily level them and steer their development while getting to know them through dialogue. *Fire Emblem* has, therefore, always contrasted with *Advance Wars*, even though it's fundamentally similar. In *Advance Wars*, your units are inherently expendable. In *Fire Emblem*, they're irreplaceable.

The bonds you develop and strengthen with *Fire Emblem* characters only grow when you know the threats are real. Putting characters into danger makes you a negligent commander – you know you'll probably win the battle, but *Fire Emblem* is all about the costs. If you lose too many characters, you might have too few to face the gauntlets that comprise the later levels, but that practical cost is far outweighed by the emotional one. Because, in that way that the best RPGs revolve around, you start to really love these little toybox people. And *Awakening*'s are among the best yet.

**In *Awakening*'s early** game there's Frederick. A stalwart and experienced knight on a horse, his starting stats are higher than the rest of the army, which is a common pattern for the series. Like *Sacred Stones*' Seth, and Marcus in *Fire Emblem*, his purpose is to take the heat in the early levels, going out into dangerous land to entice enemies into range of the rest of your force, who can easily be killed if they're attacked first. Soaking up hits and retaliating with crushing force, he's initially at the centre of your tactics and you love him dearly, until, sooner or later, you'll realise that he earns XP slower than everyone else. To strengthen your force, you'll need to carefully expose it to the front, and Frederick takes a new role: still ever-reliable and true, he becomes the army's shepherd, allowing it to make kills without getting into trouble and stealing too many of his own.

Then there's Donnel, the young farm hand with a tin pot for a helmet. A later recruit to the army, his stats are downright terrible when he starts, so he needs to be carried by the rest of the team. This presents a whole new way of playing, where rather than clearing the map, the strategy involves luring as many enemies into Donnel's range as you can, always softening them up enough in a single turn, so Donnel's weedy hits can take them out. And it needs to be in a single turn, because if an enemy unit starts its turn with Donnel in range, you can bet it'll go straight over ▶

Despite its wide range of characters, *Awakening*'s icon designs are easily identifiable, making tactical decisions a snap

and one-shot him. Why is he worth the bother? Because of his Aptitude passive skill, which increases the likelihood of his stats raising when he levels up. For those who persevere with him, by the end of the game he's a monster spouting rustic down-home quips, able to go alone into the middle of a map and face every enemy victorious.

Both these characters – and many more – become special through the way the game makes their roles distinct, inflecting battles with additional tactical layers that you can choose to take on, or not. But *Awakening* offers another way for its characters to find a way into your heart. Take the moment when Virion, the horny toff and dead-eye marksman, saves the diffident great knight Kellam from a strike that would've killed him. Saves like this, or additional attacks, are down to *Awakening*'s Dual system, in which an adjacent character can help another during attacks or defence, often swinging the encounter in your favour.

**WHEN YOUR LITTLE CHARGES RIGHT YOUR CRITICAL MISTAKES, IT FEELS AS THOUGH THEY'RE LOOKING OUT FOR YOU**

It's supremely effective. When your little charges right your critical mistakes and oversights, it feels as though they're looking out for you – that you're not alone, that it's not just cold numbers under anime trappings. The key is that they're not just random, either. The Dual system is an evolution of *Fire Emblem*'s support system, in which characters have relationships with each other. By fighting nearby each other or performing specific acts on them, their affection for each other grows through different grades. In previous games it only conferred boosted skills to friends within range of each other, but in *Awakening* it's far more important. The higher the grade, the more likely that a character will provide backup. By the end of the game, placing friends next to each other becomes a necessary part of your tactics.

The support system is so important, in fact, that it informs the game's whole narrative theme. Your army is called the Shepherds, led by a young prince called Chrom. Through a twisting story of alliances and betrayals between various competing kingdoms, against a backdrop of a rising ancient force (which is all rather hard to follow), friendships are struck, trust is earned, and motives are understood.

This personal stuff is what *Awakening* is really about, with the relationship between the player character, the Avatar and Chrom at its centre. From the start of the game, the Avatar has visions of killing Chrom, but Chrom refuses to accept them as a prophecy more powerful than friendship. Near the end of the game, the Avatar, possessed by evil forces, double-crosses Chrom, but Chrom keeps faith in his friend and they triumph. At the end we learn that the Avatar can finally banish the ultimate evil but will die in the process, unless his or her bonds with Chrom and the Shepherds are strong enough. Embodying those bonds, at the end of the story Chrom attempts to deliver the killer blow and sacrifice himself in the Avatar's place. Do you allow him to,

Each character is predisposed to strengthen their different stats in defined ways as they level up. Lissa here is all about magic

## MEET THE BOSS

*Awakening* features 49 core characters, far more than most players will ever be able to get to properly know, much less level up. Aside from those met during the story and their children, there are a number recruitable from special 'paralogue' levels that appear during the game; some are even bosses. With these you get to see what happened after you defeated them. Walhart, for instance, has raised an undead army but reveals he was using his brute power to defeat the same evil you were, and Gangrel begs Chrom to finish his misery, the challenge being to hit him three times without finishing him off, so Chrom can talk him into joining the Shepherds.

To be aided in an attack, characters need to be placed next to each other, like Chrom and the Avatar here, the odds defined by their support level

or do it yourself? After all the time you've spent together, and the support stat you've steadily developed, it's a choice with meaning that belies the pulp story.

**While the major** characters play out these grand theatrics, other members of the army are growing their relationships, too, and they probably mean even more to you. You can hear conversations between them in the barracks, watching them grow closer and learning new things about their motivations and backgrounds as their support levels rise. The lothario Virion and proud, butch mounted knight Sully are not easy friends, with Sully unimpressed by Virion's intention to defend her as a lady, but they learn to respect each other. It's light stuff, but detailed and underpinned by the experiences you've had with them on the field. To see two characters begin to appreciate each other as a result of your careful manoeuvres in battle is satisfying on many levels.

The endpoint of all this friend-making is making babies. Many characters of opposite genders can transcend A-rank support into S-rank, a state of love that will lead to a new generation of soldiers. *Awakening* features 13 such characters in all, each unique with character portraits, stats and dialogue. The astutest of players will have breeding programmes in mind, hoping to spawn the right kid and hand down to it the best skills, such as Galeforce, which grants a character a second move in their turn if they make a kill with their first.

Breeding, therefore, not only plays into the tactical game, but also into *Fire Emblem*'s metagame of character development, where you're crafting an army of the finest mettle which also suits your tactical style. The pursuit of creating a new generation is, in fact, *Awakening*'s endgame, an oddly fitting one as you replace the old with the new for an army you can take to StreetPass, which places those of other players in your world, ready to battle with.

It's in these armies that you see the true nuance that lies in *Awakening*'s systems: you see how other players chose to focus their attention; who they invested in and nurtured. And you realise how your heroes are very much your own, and how every character in *Awakening* that you overlooked or undervalued always had the potential to be a hero too. ■

When support is possible, they're shown in the attack animation, often leading to the nailbiter of whether they'll team up and save the day

# An art festival for the future

This year's digital festival from Escape Studios, part of Pearson College London, is set to be its best yet

Launched in 2013, The VFX Festival has become an important event on the calendar of creatives working in digital arts, and this year's instalment, taking place at London's O2 on February 23–25, offers a unique range of presentations aimed at videogame, animation and VFX artists. Heading up the festival's videogame-focused activity is Climax Studios, which will be in attendance to discuss its contribution to Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed Chronicles*.

In broader terms, The VFX Festival 2016 will focus on the growing convergence among the creative industries, examining how different disciplines are coming together as new technologies emerge, and the resulting challenges and opportunities facing people working across all sectors. As digital artists explore the possibilities that exist in virtual reality and other developing categories, the lines between the worlds of games, animation and visual effects industries continue to blur, and The VFX Festival 2016 is the perfect platform from which to make sense of the new creative landscape.

Outside of the traditional videogame space, this year's festival assembles some of the biggest and most respected names from the VFX world, with three separate themes across its duration.

Day one, aimed at VFX, games and animation newcomers, features The Mill, hosting sessions dedicated to augmented reality, virtual reality and the Google ATAP Project, while Hamilton & Kidd provides a feature presentation looking at VR and 360-degree technologies.

On day two (VFX, games and animation enthusiasts), MPC will be discussing its work on Ridley Scott's acclaimed sci-fi movie The Martian, while Rushes will be putting its contributions to 2015 Bond movie Spectre under the microscope.

**DIGITAL ART OPPORTUNITIES**
**The VFX Festival is the brainchild of Escape Studios, part of Pearson College London, a visual effects academy with over 13 years' experience developing world-class, studio-ready talent. Offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, Escape also provides a range of creative industry short courses focused on videogames, 3D VFX, 2D VFX, animation and motion graphics. With courses designed and implemented by professionals from world-class studios, the aim is to provide students with skills and knowledge that will see them emerge ready for industry work from day one. Key to student development is the sharing of real-world best working practices from the creative industries. To explore Escape's options, visit pearsoncollegelondon.ac.uk/escape.**

## Day three is headed up by ILM, the studio famed for its work on Star Wars

Finally, day three (VFX, games & animation professionals) is headed up by the legendary Industrial Light & Magic, the CG studio famed for its work on Hollywood productions such as the Star Wars series, and also features a panel entitled 'Is Our Education System Killing Creativity?', with contributions from experts including videogame industry luminary Ian Livingstone.

**Tickets for VFX 2016 are available to buy now at www.thevfxfestival.com**

**The VFX Festival 2015 featured sessions dedicated to some of the biggest names in entertainment, including Game Of Thrones. 2016 is aiming higher**

Dan Whitehouse

ESCAPE STUDIOS

JAMES LEACH

# Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

You know the band Sigur Rós, right? Yeah, you do. Three Icelandic lads who do catchy ethereal post-rock warbling. In 2005 they put out a song called Hoppípolla. Something about jumping in puddles. But you will have heard it a lot. In adverts, the stirring bits of music they play at courageous-children awards – that sort of thing. Anyway, legend has it that the moment they finished it they started referring to it, gleefully, as The Money Song. They knew they had a big hit on their hands. They simply knew it. And, yep, it was.

I've had the pleasure of working on a few games like this. You just know it's going to be amazing. Of course, being amazing doesn't guarantee success, but sometimes you just have the unshakeable knowledge you're creating something that'll get the world weeing in delight. Of course, pride comes before a fall and all that. But this isn't one of those lessons. Rather, it's about what everyone starts thinking about after the game has scooped the jackpot: a sequel. Lots of sequels. But for one developer I worked for, this wasn't enough. It decided the title was so good, people would immediately want to play it again. This isn't quite as ridiculous as it sounds, because, although nobody was saying it, the game – amazing as it was – was a few hours too short. Frankly you could finish it in a lunch break. On your phone.

The plan was to add in lots of easy-to-implement features and changes for those attempting it a second time. Playing it a second time would actually be a different experience. It was to be like buying two games for the price of one. And nobody in the meeting room was sighing wearily at this.

Entirely new content wasn't on the table. There wasn't time to write, code and draw all that. So the first idea was that the player, having won, is transported back to the beginning, but with all the weaponry, experience and skills they'd earned. This would, of course, grossly affect the balancing and make it far too easy, so the enemies would have all their strength and other stats ramped up by an order of magnitude. This would have the novel effect of making someone who'd achieved victory do the same thing, but greatly hampered.

This is about what everyone starts thinking about after the game has scooped the jackpot: a sequel. Lots of sequels

The next plan was to make it look different. The desert area, which took an arduous seven minutes to traverse, all without food or water, could be rendered white. Voilà, a brand-new snowy landscape. And, no, you can't eat the snow. You still have to do it without water.

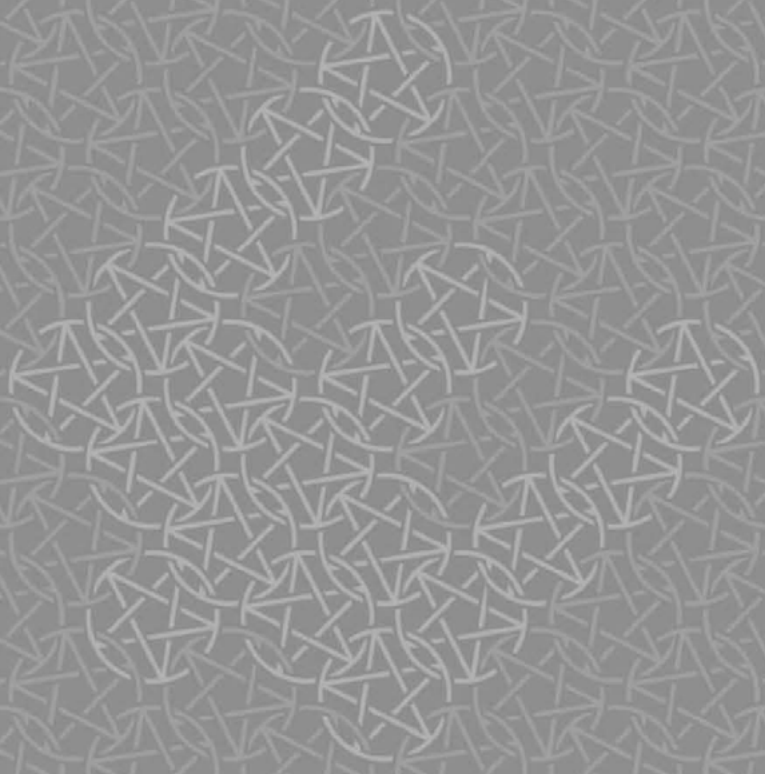
Next, all the major NPCs had their names changed. That's it. Just their names. As we all know, changing a name makes someone utterly different and unrecognisable. It's apparently how Carlos the Jackal evaded Interpol for decades. Oh, and it made sense to change the names of the items and weapons as well. And the places. It's like when Durham briefly changed its name to New Jack City in 1991. People who grew up there were instantly strangers in a strange land.

The crowning achievement was to remove many of the helpful things the player would've encountered the first time around. The logic here was that removing things is easy and quick, and the player would've gained the knowledge and experience to do without them. So no shortcut through the caves, no powerups on Mount Skull (previously known as Mount Desolation), and no Fire Sabres (Flame Swords, the first time around). It wasn't all to be an unrewarding and painful revisit, though. The powerups that did remain would be twice as powerful, and the hugely annoying Slug Trolls (previously Troll Slugs) at the canyon would be gone.

So it was to be two surefire successes in one. And the only way people would know it was by finishing the game for the first time. Unless the PR people went against strict orders and explicitly stated that there was an entirely new game buried at the end of the experience. Which they promptly did, to several huge gaming websites.

Actually I'm doing the whole thing a disservice. There was indeed new content. A little cutscene for those who completed the game twice. I say cutscene. It was a thinly veiled advert for the exciting sequel, which would be out in two years. They were going to put this out separately anyway.

It's fine to realise when you have a monster hit on your hands before it's even out. It's smart forward-thinking to plan for it. So how many did the game sell? I tried Googling this but got varying figures. I'm still in touch with the lead programmer, though, so I'll ask him later in the week, if he's not too busy serving others when I stop by to grab a Happy Meal.

*James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio*

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